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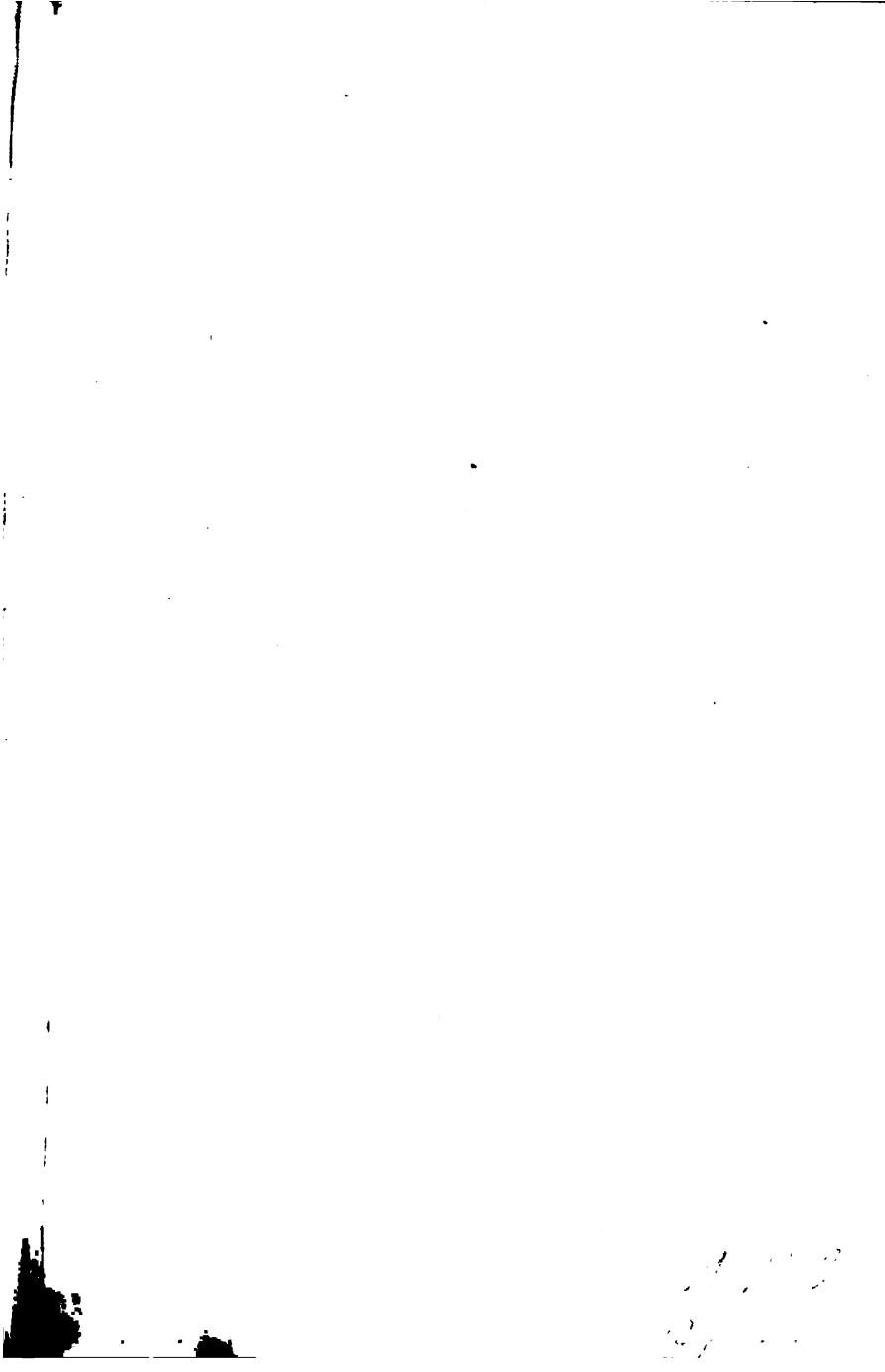
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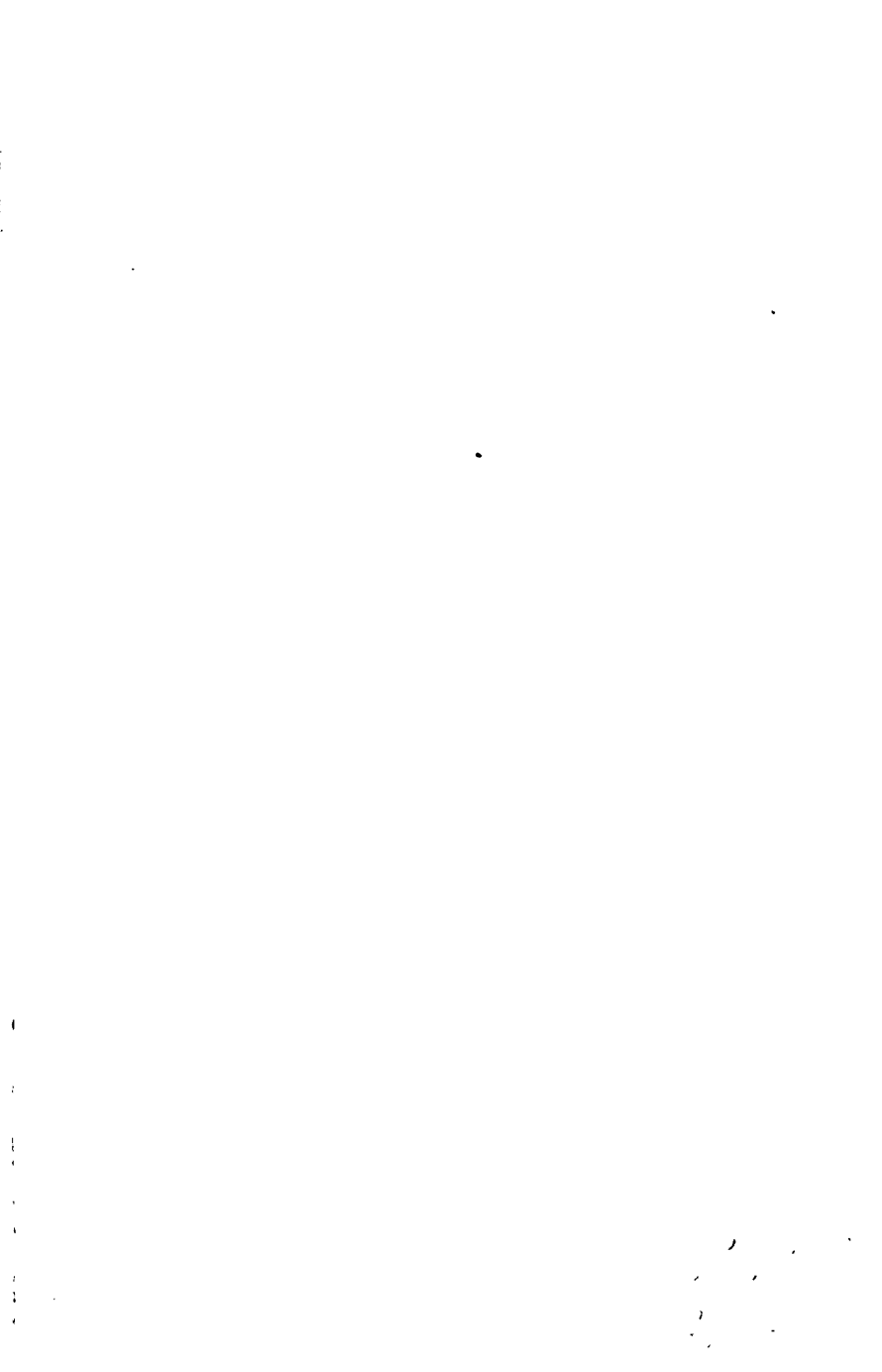
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# THE THREE KNAVES

BY  
SAUL G. GREENLEAF



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# The Three Knaves

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## CHAPTER I.

### I CANNOT MARRY YOU.

She sat behind her typewriter and he walked up and down in front of her. The room was small and he turned and turned, till he made her giddy and she shut her eyes.

Norris Mayne had known Annabel Grey all her life and now, both orphaned, he worked for his living at a private inquiry office in London; she supported herself and dwelt with a widowed aunt.

Annabel lived at the great London suburb of Ealing and the man had chambers there, though his work took him to all parts of Europe.

He was dark, powerfully built and with something of an artist's face and hand. Success had come to him in his sensational business; he was an enthusiast and had remarkable cases to his credit, though he was as yet but two and thirty years old. And now the time had come to tell this woman that he loved her with heart and soul, and desired above all desires to make her his wife.

a heart very tender ached for the man. It was not that she did not care for Norris Mayne, and care for him dearly; their lives had run closely together for ten years; but she loved another man.

"Speak, Annabel," he said at last. "I know your answer by your silence; so you won't say any sad thing I don't expect to hear. I was mad, I suppose, to ask or hope; and yet you've been so good always — so good and kind and understanding and patient."

"The kindness and goodness were yours, Norris. Oh, it's hard — hard to say one word to bring a pang of pain to you. I seem to remember you all my life as so near and dear. My playfellow when I was small; and my hero — and my hero still. But not that. I couldn't marry you, dear Norris."

He bowed his head to the blow.

"Was it too soon or too late, I wonder," he said drearily — more to himself than to her. But she answered him in a gentle, sad voice. She rose to do so and there was dignity in her pose and great beauty in the lines of her figure.

"Neither too soon nor too late, Norris. I blame myself because, always looking upon you

as a close friend, I forgot the possibility of this. I only found out how things were with you a few months ago. That was when — when I began to know what love meant myself.”

He started.

“Then I am answered. I come too late.”

“No, no. I want you to understand everything — I owe it to you. Had you asked me a year ago I should have said the same. Love I did not know and I should not have pretended that I did. Now I know it; and when I knew it, I understood the meaning of so many hidden things and began to see that you, too, cared for me like that. But what could I do till you spoke? I could not change; could not be cold. I always cared for you, remember. I could only wait and wish it over.”

He sighed.

“Well; it is over now. Oh, my God, this is a crusher for me.”

She took his hand.

“Don’t, don’t!” she said. “What am I? What is any woman? I’ll tell you everything if you’ll listen. You know him well enough yourself.”

"I've no right to bother you with questions. It doesn't matter now."

"I want the world to know — you above all others. The position is difficult. But I've no secrets from you, Norris. I have thought sometimes to tell you all about it; but he would not let me do that. Now, however, I must tell you. I'm going to marry Tom Preston."

He stared at her and his breath expired in a great gust.

"The irony of it! The irony of it!" he said.

"I know. You yourself introduced me to him, because he was Mr. Forrester's private secretary and a likely man to find work for me. Well, he did. I've been doing a great deal for Mr. Forrester — chiefly on horticultural matters. And, of course, Mr. Preston came and went; and then Mr. Forrester himself saw me and was very kind. And — and Tom asked me three months ago. And I took a month to decide and then I said, 'Yes.'"

Mayne was silent for a few moments, but presently he put out his hands and took Annabel's between them.

"I wish you joy — life-long joy of him, dearest Annabel."



"I know you do, Norris. We love one another dearly. He was not very happy, but I have made him happier. There are dark places in his life, but it will come right some day. His affairs are difficult you know. Mr. Forrester, who is childless, has adopted him in a sort of way; but there is little affection on Tom's side. He works very hard and feels no kindness for Mr. Forrester. He says that Mr. Forrester has little real sympathy for anything but plants and flowers."

"Forrester's an inhuman sort of person, I hear. Tom has told me that much himself. We were friends; but your name never rose between us. Would that it had! Preston is — well, you know what he is far better than I do. Good bye, Annabel."

She kept his hands a moment, ignorant of the suffering she inflicted by her gentle touch.

"And you'll be my friend still, Norris? Friends are few. You'll still try to be my friend — and his? I know it is asking a great deal; but I have always asked a great deal from you; I have always been greedy and selfish."

She was unconscious of cruelty in detaining

him, for a maiden's understanding of love is but shadow of substance and the girl could not guess the man's tortures at that moment — with the dream, the hope, the passion of his life in ruins at his feet.

But he was tender and gentle. The fine qualities in him stood staunch. He hid his agony, and smiled as he went away.

"Not greedy, not selfish. Little enough I have ever been able to do for you. But I'm always here — always here at your threshold — always ready — willing — thankful to help you where and when I may."

They parted and she wept when he was gone; while he returned to his home, sad above measure, yet filled with an unreasoning but almost articulate presentiment that this was not the end. A voice seemed to speak with him all through the watches of that sleepless night; a faint, persistent tone, like Annabel whispering, reached the wakeful ears of his deepest instincts and told them that for this precious woman he would be called upon to do and suffer much; that her welfare might yet pass into his keeping; that only too soon he might convince her of the necessity for such work as his. She hated it: he

knew that; but the prevenient voice declared that a hard and fierce world would presently be sweeping Annabel into its net; that predatory beasts would steal out of the shadows behind her; and that hunters such as he might soon be straining every nerve to run them to earth and protect and shield their innocent prey.

And Mayne was right. Looking back afterwards, he felt mystified to see the strength of those convictions sprung from nothing; but that they were firmly planted there was no question; within a fortnight from the evening of his rejection, the man was deep in the greatest mystery that London had wondered at for fifty years.

He indeed took no official part in the tragedy now closely shadowing the life of the woman he loved, but for her in secret he worked; for her he found no difficulty too hard, no peril too great; for her he waited in dark places; took his life in his hand; employed to the utmost extent of its strange powers an intellect specially gifted to work upon the dark and secret machinations of the human mind, and pierce those mystic mantles of physical and mental disguise that mighty criminals have power to draw between themselves and the world of men.

## CHAPTER II.

### HANGAR KNOLL.

On the rising ground that lifts behind Ealing stands Hangar Knoll, a stately mansion of Queen Anne architecture. A forest and lake subtend the estate southward and between these outlying portions of the grounds Septimus Forrester's far-famed gardens extended. Above them again was an Italian garden of pleasure, rich in statues and fountains, while higher yet extended a great terrace before the face of the dwelling.

Little was known of the master of Hangar Knoll. For five and twenty years he had resided here and his claim to fame extended far beyond Ealing or London. He enjoyed European notoriety as a horticulturist; his knowledge of the Australian flora was unique; his collection of Australian plants unrivalled. A childless widower, he had lived his early life in New South Wales, inherited a fortune from wool, and at the age of forty abandoned his

native country and settled in England. More than this none knew of him, and his own secretary and adopted son could say no more.

In person Forrester was rather above middle height, thin and bent in the back. He wore a white moustache and his eyes, permanently weakened by much microscopic, botanical work, were always covered by pale blue spectacles. He had few friends outside horticultural circles and lived plainly and even severely; but he grudged no money on his gardens and did not deny the public access to them. Twice a week the famous place was thrown open to the public at a nominal fee of sixpence; and the money thus accruing, which amounted to a considerable sum in the year, Mr. Forrester handed to the local Cottage Hospital. But he took no part in local affairs, save when the Park was opened; and then he made the town a present of half a hundred choice flowering shrubs. He attended Sunday worship and was believed to be a strong liberal in politics; but he did not go into society, and his few acquaintances came from London or the great botanical gardens of Europe.

Tom Preston, this man's private secretary, knew little more than these facts concerning him,

His large correspondence related almost entirely to his hobby and, in addition, Mr. Forrester was charitable and contributed generously to certain philanthropic societies directly or indirectly connected with the great business of horticulture.

Preston was also an Australian and at a tender age had come to England with his patron. His earlier life was hidden from him and he had faint recollections of it. He dimly remembered a soft eyed mother and little playmates; but both his parents had been swept out of his life by accident; and when they were drowned together, Forrester, a friend of the Prestons, came forward to the orphan's rescue. Other relations he had none and the lonely child, some years after his loss, was brought to England by his foster father, educated, sent to Oxford, and finally employed in his present occupation. The relation was strange, but little feeling existed on either side. Preston admitted due gratitude, did his work well and earned his modest salary; but for Forrester he entertained no affection whatever, and the elder, an able man of wide reading and general culture, found his adopted son uninteresting and uncongenial. They were friends, but neither had penetrated the other's secrets.

The elder confided nothing to his secretary; while Preston, a man of strong passions and uncertain temper, was conscious that he had not won the other's confidence and felt galled not seldom to be dependent upon him. He desired indeed to be free of Forrester and, but for the fact of his future prospects, would have left his foster father and sought a more independent life.

Preston was a man to please women, though they had entered but little into his existence. In person he was of good height and upright bearing, with a florid, clean-cut face, blue eyes and curly, flaxen hair. A man of moods, he might not be depended upon, but, when happy, was good company enough. He suffered, however, from fits of dejection; life puzzled him; he was shy and had few friends. Forrester failed to understand or appreciate the fact that there was a touch of the poet in his secretary, and Preston had long since ceased to show glimpses of his inner nature to the elder man, since he felt such characteristics were antipathetic to him. His chivalry and ideal of womanhood were lost in the master of Hangar Knoll, who disliked and distrusted women; but it was the accident of

this trait that drew Tom Preston to the girl who now made the sunshine of his life.

Annabel came to him as a revelation and a glimpse of his ardent dreams. From the day that he found work for her—to please his friend, Norris Mayne—there had bloomed in the lonely man's heart a new and wondrous flower. His courting had been tender and beautiful in its delicacy and humility; and she, versed in the trials that poverty and rare beauty bring to a woman, found him a being far removed from all mankind in his attitude to herself. But it was his general bearing to her sex that first attracted her: he made no love for many a day. They found themselves, however, meeting at not a few points, echoing each other's sentiments, and applauding each other's opinions. Soon she discovered that the man was burrowing into her heart, and she went in fear; but meantime he had grown deeply in love; and presently he found himself powerless to conceal the fact from her. He made his position clear and explained that an implicit understanding existed between Septimus Forrester and himself.

"I have not won my foster father's confidence," he declared, "though I have sought to



win it. He despises my mind, but he has made it clear to me that he regards me as his son and the heir to his wealth — in default of a better. I have only his word that it is so; but I believe it. I work for him, as any secretary might, and he pays me a regular salary. He educated me from childhood and took charge of my upbringing. I owe everything to him; yet I cannot pretend any affection or sympathy for him. These sentiments he does not feel to me either. Sometimes I have been exasperated with the relationship; but the feeling passes. He cannot be expected to share my ideas and opinions, or to feel as I do about the world and its troubles and sorrows. He is a savant. Horticulture stands for his sole passion and his arid nature has no sympathies beyond."

She understood and her sympathy came like manna in the hungry wilderness of his life. It changed him; it banished his doubt and gloom; it satisfied his passionate longing for a fuller and more beautiful existence; centred all his future ambitions and hopes upon her.

A very simple idyll was their courtship, for the man had an ingenuous nature and respected woman as the last and most precious wonder

from the Creator's hand. He found in Annabel his paragon and exemplar of all that woman should be; and she felt for him that he was the first and last man her nature would ever love, trust and cleave to. So they swam together; and now he lived for her and she for him.

But Preston desired silence for the moment. He regarded with utmost doubt the attitude his master would adopt towards the announcement of an engagement, and experience inclined him to fear that Mr. Forrester might look with little pleasure at any such plan. The elder had not seldom warned Tom against matrimony as a pit-fall to a young man's progress and ambition. He slighted the state in general terms and on general principles, and his secretary felt only too sure that this betrothal would win but small support from the great botanist for whom he worked.

Yet the prospect of a quarrel and dismissal from the dreary routine of Hangar Knoll was not wholly distasteful to him. He felt that he could support it well enough single-handed, and only when he considered Annabel Grey, and her future as his wife, did he fear to relinquish this great stake and fight the world single-handed.

Delay now ceased to be possible to the man's ardent nature, and a day came, soon after his betrothed had revealed her secret to the young detective, when Tom, taking his courage in both hands, prepared to put the truth before Septimus Forrester. The latter chanced to be in great good humour one evening after dinner, and his mood prompted the confession. They sat together, their meal ended, and the younger man poured a glass of port for the elder. Septimus blinked through his blue glasses and patted his white moustache. It was a habit of his. Then he drank and spoke.

"I knew I had the finest specimen in England. But this braggart from Cornwall doubted it—came all the way to see it; then showed such bitter disappointment, that I perceived without any words that he was floored. He hated my collection. He writhed before the wattles; he nearly screamed with envy when I exhibited doryanthes in flower. He would have liked to take his knife and hack down the great scarlet spikes. I love to prick these windbags."

He laughed drily and lighted a cigar.

"There's a good deal of human nature among you gardeners, sir."

"There is, Tom; there is. I'm the last to deny it. I don't like to be beat. At least, I didn't."

"You forget the sensation."

"Almost. But I shall have some sparring with the authorities when my great work, 'Ex Horto Australis', appears. To call a continent a garden! And to crush some of our friends to the dust and send their cherished theories down the wind! There'll be wigs on the green!"

His voice was very peculiar—the scientist's voice, hard, metallic, inhuman—lacking all resonance and cadence. It sounded like a machine.

"Another year and you will have finished?"

"Say two; and that reminds me,—our young lady—the typewriter—you must caution her. She is stupid, I fear. In the last list I marked no less than two errors—'ribes' for 'ribus' and Corokia Cotoneaster spelled with two r's. Tell her she will get no more work if there are to be more mistakes."

"My manuscript was to blame, sir. And—and—I want to speak of Miss Grey a moment, if it won't bore you."

"All women bore me and always did—all, of course, but my own lamented wife. But there are none left in her pattern. Keep clear of the

petticoats, Tom; they entangle a youngster worse than any other hindrances in the world. The definition of virgin is correct: *Vir*—a man; *gin*—a trap. Sum total, a man-trap."

"But she —"

A man-servant entered — grave and obsequious, yet not without his own little touch of pomposity and self-respect.

"There's somebody to see you, sir."

"From Kew?"

"No, sir; from Australia."

"What a time to come!"

"It's very urgent, he says, sir."

"His name?"

"Wouldn't give it, sir."

"Then tell him to go away again."

"He hesitated, sir, when I asked for it. Then he said, 'Tell him it's B. B. from Coolgardie.'"

Forrester knit his brows and showed immense astonishment. For a moment his bent back shot into straightness; then he relapsed again.

"Amazing!" he said. "A miracle — the dead come to life! But the dead ought not to come to life. It is bad form, and indiscreet, and —"

He broke off and picked up his cigar.

"Show him into the library, Tucker. I will

be there in two minutes. And, Tucker, stop there; mend the fire; adjust the light — anything. But don't leave the room until I come. We may have an aborigine to deal with — one who entertains faulty ideas uncorrected by the eighth commandment."

The servant withdrew and Forrester lapsed into profound thought.

"There can only be one 'B. B.'," he said, to himself, but aloud. "And I thought he had mixed his bones with Australian dust full thirty years ago. I have pleasantly pictured him nourishing the Australian flora with his abundant personality."

Preston did not speak and the other rose and went to see his visitor.

## CHAPTER III.

### THE BROODING OF THE STORM.

Mr. Forrester's interview with the stranger was protracted and Tom, irritated at the accident that took his foster father from him, at a psychological moment when the love story might have been told with success, drank rather deeply and then went to the billiard room. Still Forrester did not rejoin him and weary of waiting, the younger man summoned a servant.

Tucker appeared and Preston learned that the master had gone to bed.

An event so unusual interested him, and he asked for particulars.

"Stop and have a game if the governor's not coming down again," he said; and Tucker, who was a skilful player and always very willing to show his skill, gladly obeyed.

They struck for break and Tom asked a question.

"Who was this chap and what has he done to send Mr. Forrester to bed in such a hurry?"

"A rum un, sir — quite out of the common. Not one of them gardening people — I saw that very quick. They're all meek and mild and humble as earth worms. I don't know what it is about gardening, but it makes folks like that — all but master. You wouldn't call him humble. He's bad when he's angry, but worse when he's pleased. That man's jokes cut like a razor!"

"Well, get on. By jove, I wish you'd teach me that shot, Tucker."

The footman had just played a beautiful long jenny into the left hand top pocket from baulk.

"You can play it quite as well as me, sir. He was a very big, burly man, with a knock-me-down sort of way and a loud voice. Red as a beet his face was, with a dirty, yellow moustache, like an old scrubbing brush. Eyes that looked round the corner and ears like a bat's wings. I never see anything so peculiar in a man's boots. Must have come from foreign parts I reckon. A billy-cock hat on the back of his head and an underhung jaw. 'Do you come about the garden, sir?' I asked him. And he said, 'D— the garden. I want Mr. —.' Then he broke off, as if he was trying



to remember the name; and then he said 'Forrester.' When I asked for his — good winner, sir! — when I asked for his name, he said, 'Tell him as 'B. B.' have turned up. 'Tis a many years since we met, but he'll remember 'B. B.' "

"So he did," answered Preston. "You could see that. He was surprised for once. It made him sit up."

Tucker fished the red ball out of a pocket and spotted it. Tom went on with his break.

"He might have been here half an hour," continued the footman. "I took 'em in whiskey and soda. The big man — a whacker he is — was standing afore the fire, and master was sitting at his desk. They seemed genial and pleasant while I was in the room; but after I'd gone out — in fact, as I went away — I heard the stranger's voice rolling out again and, not to put too fine a point upon it, he was angry — very angry indeed, I should reckon. I showed him out ten minutes later, and he was cussing and swearing under his breath like a tom cat as had met his match. And one very queer thing I marked: the big man had but two fingers on the left hand. The third finger and the little

one was all that was left on it. It made me queer to see such a paw on anybody."

"He didn't get much change out of the governor, who ever he was."

"No, sir. It isn't his habit to give change. That's eighteen I've made, sir."

The game quickly ended and Tom retired; but next morning his mouth had to be shut upon the great matter at his heart, for Septimus Forrester proved in a very taciturn humour and was evidently full of his own concerns. He left directions for the day's work and departed early to London.

Upon the District Railway, before Ealing is reached, there stands the station of Ealing Common, and it was Mr. Forrester's custom there to take train for town and thither to return in the evening. He usually walked, letting himself out of the grounds by a private gate at the bottom of them; and in this way he also returned home. His movements were regular and he came and went punctually at certain hours. Twice a week he usually travelled to London for the day, and his other activity away from home was frequently to take the chair at evening meetings of the Royal Horticultural

Society. On these occasions he motored to and from London.

A week passed and Forrester continued in no mood to hear his secretary's confession. Indeed, had his manner changed from its cold pre-occupation, Preston would not have approached him now, for he, too, at this juncture, found himself with much else to think upon than love.

Twice, during the interval, he saw Annabel Grey and she was frightened, for the man presented her with a difficult puzzle and showed her that he laboured under the darkest tribulation. She tried in vain to share his grief; but he refused to let her do so. Then, for a time, he departed out of her life altogether. Two letters went unanswered. She called to see him, on an occasion of bringing some typewriting to Hangar Knoll; but he returned a message that he could not see her and she went home in deep distress.

This sudden situation she defined a few days later to Norris Mayne. Lovers are selfish, and unhappy ones may be forgiven if they seek anyone where they know that sympathy is to be found. She met the young detective by chance,

on his way home from the station, and the accident loosed her tongue.

"After what has happened, it seems horrid to bother you with my affairs, Norris, and yet — and yet."

"Didn't I beg you to? Didn't I tell you that I was always ready and willing and proud to be a friend to you? You've changed my life, Annabel; but you couldn't help that, and I'm never going to talk about it again. I ask you now to let me have the mighty privilege of being useful to you if I can."

"I hope it is not so bad as it looks — only things seem strange and sad just now, and it will comfort me a great deal to talk to you if you can listen. I mean Tom. He's changed — he's changed. Something has happened to him. It's breaking his heart — and mine. He loves me well enough; but there are greater things than love; he said that. He used those words when last we met, and I suppose they are true. But it was very terrible to me to hear them, for I did not know there was anything greater. He is in trouble — some fearful trouble it must be, because he says it is fearful; but he won't tell me what. I tried to know,

— I fought to know; but I could not win him. There are dark things in his life that he is hiding from me, Norris, so I must be less — far less — to him than I thought.”

“Don’t you believe it,” answered the other. “That’s all nonsense, Annabel. A man isn’t going to bother his sweetheart with every two-penny half-penny trouble or difficulty. He’s had a tiff with his master — or foster father I ought to say. Probably that is the whole matter.”

“More than that — far more than that. There is some awful difference between them. I mentioned Mr. Forrester when last I saw Tom, and he turned white and his eyes blazed. He was like a madman for a minute. He forgot me and cursed Septimus Forrester and cried out to Heaven to rid the world of him! He clenched his fists and gave vent to uncontrollable, awful rage. I thought I was in a nightmare. It was not Tom but a demon that raved there in front of me. Then he came to his senses and seemed to wake up again and be himself. He asked me to forgive him, and laughed it off, and tried to make me happy again. But love is not the first thing in his mind now. It cannot be. Hate seems to have

eaten it up. And I am so powerless and useless to him. Oh, what can I do to show him his good is my good, and that he can trust me in any sorrow or trouble?"

The other was deeply interested; but he hid his interest, for an instinct told him to strike a light note and reassure her if possible.

"Love is quick to be frightened and anxious," he said. "I knew Tom Preston before you did, remember, and I think I understand him a little. His position is difficult and for a long time inclination has drawn him one way; wisdom, another. He has never had much sympathy with Mr. Forrester and cares not a jot about flower-growing and all the rest of it. You know better than I do that Tom's a poet. I'll wager that he's made fine rhymes to you! And like all artistic people, he is up and down and uneven in temper. Now he'll be full of good fellowship and the best of pals for a happy man; now he'll turn cloudy and morose and bad company for everybody. Would you like to know what I think has happened? He's told Forrester of the engagement, and Forrester has forbidden it. That's why he's in such a rage for the

moment. It will all come right if you give it time."

But Annabel shook her head.

"I don't think so, Norris. He would have told me had that been the difficulty. Why should he have hidden that? Besides, he expected it. No, he has not broken our betrothal to Mr. Forrester yet; and even had he done so and been warned that the engagement must not continue — even such a terrible thing as that would not have made him mad. We anticipated that; we had talked it out and decided that Tom should renounce his promised inheritance, rather than give me up, and find new work in the world. He would have it so. The prospect of poverty troubled him little save on my account; but this — this secret thing that has burst into his life — this must be far worse. I feel that there is some awful trouble in store for us, and I would give my life to be able to share it with him, or lift it from him."

The man reflected.

"I saw Tom a few days ago in London," he said. "I was about an unpleasant little matter of watching a man at Camden Town, and, very much to my surprise, Tom Preston and another

passed me in the street. I was disguised, so of course Tom didn't know me. He looked ill — I found time to mark that — haggard and troubled and wild; but my attention was chiefly drawn to his companion. A very big, loud-talking, truculent man — evidently new come from abroad. There was every mark of the colonial upon him. A man of sixty I should judge — or more; but hale and powerful still. A scarred, coarse face, and one could read a little of his character from it. A good servant, but no master was that man: one ready to execute, yet without intellect to originate. I could not leave my post just then, but watched them out of sight. One word only I heard as they passed: the word 'Drake' spoken by the stranger. Has Preston mentioned anybody to you?"

She shook her head and spoke.

"It seemed, last time I saw him, that he came to me from force of habit rather than because he wanted to. His mind was entirely pre-occupied. It was like a strange man beside me — I felt shy of him. He did not stop very long. But after the storm I tell you about, he tried to be himself again — tried and failed."

"You know 'The Dive'?" asked Mayne. "It



is a little club here, where men meet in the evenings. One or two of the actors generally drop in for a drink on their way home from London, and several interesting chaps belong to it. Preston often calls late at night there, for Mr. Forrester generally turns in at eleven, and after Tom has played his usual game of chess or billiards with the old man he strolls down from Hangar Knoll to 'The Dive.' I'll have a chat with him next time we meet, and I'll go to-night and every night, Annabel, until he turns up. Then I shall find out what is bothering him — if I can."

She was very grateful and he made light of the matter and promised swiftly to lift the cloud from her mind; but in reality the man felt very deeply perturbed. It was not in nature that he could be gravely concerned for Preston; but the old warning of tribulation that would touch Annabel Grey, darken her life and destroy her hope, now crowded heavily down upon him. His knowledge of character was great and he understood that Preston's fierce temper and ill-regulated instincts might, under certain circumstances, be very pregnant of evil. It seemed already that the torch had come to the tinder.

He made inquiries and found that Mr. Forrester was away from home, but would return some days later. Then, visiting 'The Dive,' he could hear nothing of Preston, save that the young man had not been there for a long time. Preston himself came in, however, while others were talking of him, and the least observant marked that he was not himself. His pallor was very great for a man naturally florid, and his manner revealed excitement and nervousness. Mayne endeavoured to get some speech from him, but found Preston reserved and strangely suspicious. He showed actual aversion for the other's company, and when Norris offered to walk home beside him and enjoy the moonlight, Tom declined with a decision that was rude. Tact proved unavailing; banter failed; patience met no reward. The man clearly laboured under an exceeding great obsession; and when he left, another problem concerning him was added to those already in Mayne's mind. His professional habit was to take each part of a puzzle separately and examine it, in all its individual significance, before seeking to fit it into the major problem. Now he set aside the evident fever and unrest under which Preston laboured and

asked himself why, the conditions being as they were, he had come to "The Dive" that night at all. Why also had his ordinary proposal to accompany the other on his homeward way been met with a refusal so blank and absolute? No answers to these questions appeared.

## CHAPTER IV.

### THE BREAKING OF THE STORM.

A week later Annabel called again at Hangar Knoll and it was Tucker who answered her summons. An evening in late autumn bit shrewdly and dead leaves rustled down out of the upper darkness.

"Come in out of the cold, Miss," he said. "No, Mr. Preston isn't home, and I understand he won't be for a few days. He's making holiday and few enough he takes. But the master returns to-day."

"Mr. Preston sent no message?"

"Not for you, Miss. Between you and me and the gate post, there's a bee got in the gentleman's bonnet. Quite changed — that short — and off his whiskey and off his billiards and off everything. Not to put too fine a point on it, he's in love! If I don't know the signs, who should?"

"I am most anxious to see him — about the work, Tucker. Do you know his address?"

"I do not, Miss. I suppose now you don't know the lady, Miss?"

"I think I do, Tucker. But I mustn't tell. If all goes smoothly, you will soon know."

"There! didn't I feel I was right! But the course of true love never do run smooth, Miss. And it's going a bit lumpy with him, for certain. That rough he is — even to me!"

A telegraph boy came to the open door and Tucker found that the message was directed to himself.

"From the master, not coming by usual train and walking from the station; but the car have got to meet the 7.30. Lord! how Masters will cuss! That's our 'choofoor,' Miss. He took the housekeeper and two of the girls out this afternoon and he haven't washed down. I must go and spoil his tea, Miss."

Tucker departed and the girl went her way, full of sorrow. Tom had gone from home and had not even told her where he was, or what his plans might be. She walked slowly down Hangar Hill and at the bottom of it she passed Septimus Forrester himself. A lamp sent a watery ray into the dark air at the foot of the hill, and on one side ran the wall of Hangar

Knoll with trees hanging over it; while upon the other, there extended waste building land. It was beneath the lamp and at a distance of twenty yards from his private entrance that Anabel met Mr. Forrester, and the lamplight showed him clearly. He was apparently deep in thought and did not notice her as she passed him. She turned a moment, watched him, saw him stop at his wicket, bring out a key, enter his grounds and slam the door after him. It fitted close into the lofty wall.

Wondering that he had changed his mind, despite the telegram, she went on her way and met a policeman. Then, when near the bridge over the Great Western Railway at the bottom of Hangar Hill, she heard distinctly and in rapid succession the sounds of a pistol or revolver fired thrice. The significance of the report did not appeal to her; she was only startled at the loud noise breaking upon the night's stillness. She proceeded home and forgot the incident; but the constable who had passed her some few moments before, attached far more importance to it. He was zealous; he too, had seen the familiar figure of Septimus Forrester go by him and, knowing the movements of the master of

Hangar Knoll, perceived that the shots must have been fired soon after Forrester had entered his woods. Thence came the explosion, and P. C. 342B. fearing evil, blew his whistle.

A brace of constables presently ran to answer it; two, mounting their comrade's shoulders, scaled the wall and then they drew up the third. Turning on their dark lanterns they proceeded through the wood, by the path Forrester had recently taken from the gate; and they had not gone above fifty yards before they found the man himself—prone and evidently lifeless. His hat was fallen off and his face was buried in the ivy-clad earth beside the pathway. The bullseye lanterns shone on a countenance grimed with mud and blood. The dead man's hands were clenched. He had been shot in the breast and was bleeding profusely from the mouth. His blue glasses, which fastened with an elastic band behind, were still upon his eyes; but one was broken.

A policeman ran to the house, while the remaining two made hasty search in the woods immediately surrounding the scene of the murder. Not twenty minutes had elapsed from the sound of the shots before Forrester's dead body

was discovered; but the murderer had won an ample start and it seemed certain that he must have slipped from below the woods, crossed a field and descended the railway beneath.

Two men, bringing with them a large flat wheelbarrow used for carrying of flowerpots, arrived presently; and the dead master of Hangar Knoll was conveyed to his home. They laid him in the billiard room and the motor car, just about to start for the railway station, set out instead to fetch Forrester's medical man. Until he arrived the police would allow none to touch the corpse and Tucker, though he desired to do so, was not permitted even to cleanse the bruised face of blood. Horror-stricken servants crept whispering in the corridors; the men stared upon the corpse; the women hurried about, peeped fearfully into the billiard room. Then came the doctor; but he had barely approached his murdered patient when a loud voice rang through the hall and there was a shrieking of women and flying of many feet.

"What on earth is the meaning of this? Why did not the car fetch me according to my telegram?"

Tucker, who was in the billiard room, uttered



a strange sound, clutched wildly about him and fainted. But none heeded his collapse. The police hastened out; Doctor Thwaites, who had just knelt down by the corpse, leapt to his feet again.

For while he held the cold hand of Septimus Forrester and looked upon the man's mangled body, the angry, living voice of Forrester echoed through the mansion.

"Tucker, Morrison—what the devil is happening? Where's Mr. Preston? Has everybody gone mad?"

The doctor left a dead Forrester and went out to confront a quick one. Even he felt his heart throb and experienced a strange dizziness. The likeness was absolute. Here stood a hale and hearty man with his voice high pitched in anger; his chin stuck out, his moustache bristling and the light flashing in his blue glasses; while not six yards away, another being, identical in every respect, lay stricken lifeless and soaked in his own blood. Only the colour of their faces differed, for the Septimus Forrester in the billiard room was pale with death; the Septimus Forrester in the hall was red with rage.

Fearing shock and concerned more for the living than the dead, Doctor Thwaites, an elderly practitioner of long experience, came forward. Some strange and evil thing had happened, but he kept his nerve before it and, fearing impersonation, scrutinised the living man very closely. His voice, however, proclaimed the living man, for it was of the usual strident and uncommon pitch. Moreover there were not wanting a thousand signs that the genuine Forrester lived. None could have simulated combined annoyance and astonishment so perfectly. And when it was explained to him that one resembling himself in every particular had just been found murdered in the woods of Hangar Knoll, the true Forrester's amazement and alarm were unmistakeable. His colour faded; his voice sank; he began to shiver; and it was only by a great effort of will that he braced himself to investigate the tragedy.

To the dead they went and horror beyond imagination awaited them. Carefully the corpse was stripped and the deep breast wound washed. Then a ghastly sight appeared, for literally an old head on young shoulders stared with glazed eyes upon them. The trunk and

limbs of the murdered man were in their prime of adult vigour; while the head, with its white hair, white moustache and wrinkled skin belonged to an age as great again. Here lay a splendid athlete of exceptional physical endowments with the withered head of a man of seventy.

Quickly the physician solved this hideous mystery. He washed the dead face and its moustache came off in his hand. A white wig similarly parted from the skull it covered; the painted surface of the corpse's countenance was cleansed, a flaxen head was revealed, and Thwaites uttered sudden expressions of grief and horror at an extraordinary revelation.

"Good God, Forrester!" he cried. "This is your secretary — Tom Preston!"

The other had been sitting by the billiard-table and seeking in the clothes of the dead for any means of identification. Now he leapt to his feet and came forward.

He stared, staggered and fell back. A policeman caught him and helped him to a chair. They brought him brandy and slowly he regained strength and self-control.

There could no longer be any doubt of the

truth. The murdered man was Forrester's secretary. He lay staring up in death at the living crowded round him, and his face, though distorted with terror and sudden agony, was none the less familiar to most of those who now gazed upon it.

Thwaites turned to Septimus Forrester, who had now recovered his self-control.

"What d'you make of this?" he asked.

The other, master of himself, shrugged his shoulders and replied:

"I make nothing of it—nothing save this. Poor Tom apparently was playing a joke at my expense to-night. But he's been called upon to pay the price himself. A practical joke, I suppose—they are always a mistake."

## CHAPTER V.

### MAYNE COMES TO ANNABEL.

Impenetrable mystery surrounded the death of Tom Preston after Mr. Forrester had himself stated the position to the police in so far as he knew it.

"For the past few weeks," he said, "my secretary, who was also my heir and adopted son, has been strange, reserved and preoccupied. There has clearly been something upon his mind; but he was a man little given to confidences and, after endeavouring to learn his trouble and being told that he had none, I minded my own business—a favourite occupation with me—and ceased to interest myself in the matter. Now it appears that, for some secret purpose, he endeavoured to represent me on the night of his murder; and as you know he did so with only too fatal a result. He is dead and probably he has taken his secrets with him, since my offer of a thousand pounds, to anybody who can throw light on his actions has

not as yet met a response. Yet a thousand pounds is a handsome sum.

"But now it remains to consider these circumstances from my own point of view. That is distinctly interesting. In a word, there has apparently been an attempt upon my life, and I now demand of the law a very thorough investigation of this attempt. I am a good deal hurt about it and I invite the closest scrutiny. I am unaware of the existence of any man who cherishes animosity against me—a harmless horticulturist. Yet such an abominable, unreasonable man must exist; and as I am in peril of him still, for all I know to the contrary, I claim the law's protection. Here is a unique opportunity for you men to earn your wages and restore the waning confidence of the public in your performances."

But the law, with every desire to support Septimus Forrester against secret foes, found itself baffled and defeated. Skilled detectives examined the scene of Preston's murder and endeavoured to trace his movements during the days that preceded his death. But no light could be thrown upon them; it proved impossible to trace him; and as for the actual theatre

of the tragedy, it told nothing. Forrester himself displayed a cynical interest and was full of suggestions; but time passed and no clue rewarded those who investigated the crime.

For some while the master of Hangar Knoll exhibited caution, kept at home and only walked in his garden houses with a companion; but after passage of days, it appeared that his anxiety lessened and he pursued the routine of his life as of old.

Preston was buried and a great concourse attended his funeral. Curiosity drew the larger number, but certain friends were present for honest regard of the dead. Mr. Forrester himself was not beside the grave, though he sent his carriage and a mighty floral trophy. He was unquestionably perturbed by the loss of his foster son and made no effort to hide his concern. Mayne went to the funeral for private reasons; and he was glad afterwards that he had done so, for his eyes marked a solitary, black-veiled figure there, and he knew that one breaking heart throbbed beside her loved dust as Preston sank into his grave.

Annabel Grey was alone at the funeral and she walked home alone afterwards. The man

did not presume to disturb her grief, but he followed at a distance unseen. He had imagination, and the thought of her unutterable suffering made him sad. For there was none to comfort her; none to guess what this awful catastrophe must mean to her. The joy and hope of her life were gone; worse—far worse than his own lot was her's, for Norris Mayne was a man and her refusal was not coupled with any tragedy outside his own stricken heart. But she had been torn from her lover by death—death sudden, terrible and mysterious. His pity possessed him; resolutely he banished any thought of self; yet he was drawn irresistibly to the girl. The dark thing shadowed in his dreams had happened, but the help that he had longed to give must now come too late. He desired, however, to know Annabel's attitude towards this mystery of death that had crushed upon her life and changed it. From the point of view of his profession, he found the problems presented by Preston's end absorbing, and he was seriously tempted to enter on a secret investigation. The failure of the police had proved absolute and none came forward to claim any part of the rewards offered by Septimus Forrester.



Mayne determined to call upon Annabel. He had already written to her expressing sympathy, but to see her he delayed, for the position was supremely delicate in the light of her loss. He loved her and she knew it; therefore he hesitated. But she answered his letter and asked him to go to her. The note reminded him again of her frank and ingenuous nature. She had not perceived the reason why he absented himself—either that, or else her grief had hidden from her his natural motives.

Mrs. Fane, Annabel's widowed aunt—a good natured and homely woman—was glad to see the son of her old friend—the detective's dead mother.

"You're welcome and more than welcome, Norris," she said. "My poor, precious Annabel is wanting you. I know all about her secret now, and I won't say I hadn't guessed it long ago. She loved this young man and they were engaged. She has got over the first awful shock, and her mind is set on knowing all about the truth. But that—so I say—will never be known till judgment. However, you'll comfort her if you can. She wants to see you."

Mrs. Fane departed presently, that Annabel

might speak with the man alone. She came to him. Their conversation was a long one. Like storms across a fair sky, her grief swept the girl's lovely face; but, between outbursts of terrible sorrow, she recovered her self-possession, and made it clear to Norris that her passionate desire was to solve the secret of her lover's murder.

"I can't tell you why I hunger for this," she said. "You might think it mattered little to me now what were the causes that led to his death; but there is something—a desire, an instinct, a longing, a hunger—to find out what my dear dead Tom was doing at the last—what seemed to turn him from me—into what trouble and difficulty he was plunged, and how he lost his life. I do not think he had an enemy. I am sure the man or woman who shot him did not know or dream of what they were doing. These dreadful things are your business, Norris. Oh, help me, and let me help you if I can, to understand and explain."

"Gladly—thankfully!" he said. "What I can do, I will do. All have failed, but none had the incentive that belongs to me. I will dedicate my life to this thing if need be."

"Do not say that. I have no right to force it upon you. It may be beyond human power, now that Tom is dead, to explain his death. And, after all, it does not matter to him. He is at peace and the fret and turmoil and sorrow of life are over for him. He cared little for the promises that life made him. Often, often he said, that until he met me, his days were barren and wasted. But to clear him—it is that. One cannot tell why he did such strange things and, if we could find the reason, we should perhaps understand how and why he died."

In a spirit almost solemn, Mayne undertook the great task now put upon him. He was an able man, fully equipped to fight the forces of crime and experienced in the darkest ways of human nature; he was also very deeply in love, for looking back, he could not hide from himself the renewed possibility of winning what he still yearned to win. He conceived the hope of yet making Annabel love him. She was young and her life's romance had been very short. It seemed to him that she could not for ever cherish the memory of this dead romance. He trusted time to help him here; and he trusted

himself, thus inspired, to solve the problem of Tom Preston's death. Now he left her with a full heart and promised to do all that he could.

"I shall not see you for a fortnight," he said. "And, at the end of that time, I shall tell you if I have even made a beginning. I may not have done so. My methods are laborious. But you know me, Annabel, and you know that I shall use every faculty that I possess to serve you in this terrible matter. I need say no more now, or tell you of the deep, heartfelt sympathy I felt when I heard what had befallen you."

"I know that, Norris," she said. "If I had not well known it, I could not have asked you to come to me in these dark hours. I am selfish always—selfish even in my grief and loss. It is as much to be doing and working and filling my mind and shutting out my awful thoughts—it is as much for that as for my dear one—that I want to clear this dark mystery and labour for his memory. Oh, I would die for it and thankfully go after him, if there was anything to be gained by death."

He left her then and a day later began his great task. Everything that the inquest had gleaned he knew; but the facts were trifling and useless. Preston's papers were in order and no

clue to his actions could be found among them. It proved impossible to trace him or find where he had been living during the last few days of his life, in which he was absent from Hangar Knoll. His correspondence revealed nothing. A little bundle of Annabel's love-letters were discovered by Forrester, and they profoundly interested the savant. He sent indeed for the girl, questioned her closely, and returned the letters to her.

She found him in deep concern at his loss. He spoke of it as the sorrow of his life and won her heart to confidence; while she in her turn told him how Preston had loved her, but feared to declare their secret engagement. Septimus Forrester then explained with some warmth of feeling that any such doubt was unfounded. "I should have raised no objection whatever. There are authentic cases of happy marriages, and at any rate such an enterprise is a man's own business, but not his master's," he assured her. He was sympathetic, restrained his irony and promised to keep her secret.

Then passed a fortnight, and Norris Mayne returned to Annabel, according to his promise. He had news for her, and she had news for him.

## CHAPTER VI.

### MAYNE MAKES A START.

"I will ask you to listen patiently," he said. "There is no special need why you should hear what I am going to say, but you will none the less desire to do so. I have little interesting to tell you; yet I know something, and even the least fact in my business is like a rock in a stormy sea—a thing trustworthy and to be depended upon—a foundation for a lighthouse if need be—a steadfast, unyielding thing, to which one may cling in the wildest welter of doubt and mystery."

The woman was always practical.

"Smoke while you talk, Norris," she said. "I've often heard you declare that the movement of tobacco smoke has a curious effect to clear your mind."

"Fancy your remembering that! It's true. I've sometimes seen actual missing words twist and turn and take shape from the writhing curls of Nicot's hair as they stream out of my pipe. We're artists you know—in our way, Annabel."

He was thankful that she could listen in this mood. He lighted his pipe and began to talk.

"I started from a rather different point of view to that adopted by Scotland Yard. They have a cut and dried way, and experience has evolved it. It is a splendid way, and often most effective, and it has taught me much; but a free lance, working unknown, has always a very great pull over professional men, whose daily investigation is at the mercy of every penny-a-liner. Secrecy is the breath of life to a detective at his work, and secrecy is often just the condition most difficult to insure. Now nobody in the whole world but you, Annabel, is aware that I am at this case — not my own people, or the government officials. I have the benefit of the little the police learned, and I am beginning, as far as poor Tom Preston was concerned, where they left off. But I am beginning on a new line, which they did not pursue; and that investigation yet to be made, may perhaps lead me to the truth in the long run.

"First for facts; then for theory. What I have actually found is this: that two men were in Hangar Knoll Wood on the night of Preston's murder. I have spent six nights there and

I rather like working in the dark thus; because your attention is focused. You see nothing but the few feet of earth exposed to your electric torch; you quarter every yard of the ground separately and concentrate eye and mind and energy on every yard in turn. Daylight and your surroundings do not distract you at such a time. Then, when the evidence is yielded, if evidence there is, you can put the fragments together and see if they make a whole, or if they do not.

"Yes, I have been there for six nights, and my range of investigation was wider than that of Jimmy Stokes, the Scotland Yard crack. Of course, I knew what he'd done, and I went outside his radius. I argued, you see, that those responsible for the crime were waiting in the wood and expecting the man they meant to destroy. They must have reached the wood before daylight was gone, and they must have sought some place where they could conceal themselves until the moment of meeting. They would want to be near the path, and they would also want to be as near their means of escape as possible. I guessed, therefore, that their hiding place must be pretty close to the private en-



trance. I suspected that it might be found quite near Mr. Forrester's private door. Had they been far from it, they could not have told when their prey entered the wood, and he might have escaped them. But there was no possible place of concealment either near the path or within the wide radius searched by Stokes and his assistants.

"To spare you more of this I found an open drain over-hung with ivy and briars and practically concealed. It was a long way from the place where Preston fell and I only discovered it by nearly tumbling into it. I examined the hole very carefully—foot by foot—and I found what I hoped to find—evidence that other men had been there. Whether the footmarks were those of the detectives, I could not at first tell and, indeed, should not know to this moment; but what threw light on the matter was the mark of hands, not feet. Here clearly stood two individuals waiting the arrival of the dead man, and I explain their actions thus. They knew that he would presently come through the gate in the wall. He was due at a time they had learned. And they knew that he would shut the gate after him. The shutting of the gate was

their signal that he had come; and, upon hearing that sound, they left their hiding-place in the ditch. But to do so entailed a little trouble, for they had to climb out, as they had to jump in. The place was five feet deep. I think they cannot have realised that to leave it hurriedly would entail some effort, for their exit was made in a scrambling fashion. They dug their fingers into a band of clay over which hung ivy. Some of the ivy strands were broken off. There is every sign that they were in a hurry, because to intercept the pedestrian, get ahead of him in the wood path, and then turn and confront him, needed considerable speed. We know that they achieved their purpose.

“And now I will explain why I speak of ‘they.’ Upon the side of the ditch, whence they probably scrambled at the signal of the shutting gate, are the mark of fingers very clearly stamped. Three hands in a row have left more or less visible impressions, and where the fourth hand would have been is a stout ivy strand which was ready to its use and which it clutched. These three impressions are too broken and irregular to be of much assistance; but higher yet—on the top of the ditch—one man,

as he crawled up and before he got to his feet, left a very distinct stamp of his fingers and palm on an uncovered fragment of soil. It is the picture of a large hand, but a maimed one. The hand had but two fingers — the third finger and the little finger. The others were not there. Leaves might, of course, have blocked them out of the impression and blown away afterwards leaving the erroneous suggestion of a mutilated hand; but this did not happen, for the stumps of the two vanished fingers—the middle of the forefinger—are clearly noticeable pressed on the soil."

He stopped a moment and brought a drawing from his pocket.

"That is an enlargement from a sketch I made upon the spot. And this is nearly all I actually know. If I could find the man who owns that hand, I should have gone a long way, but I have no idea where to seek for him at present. He may be at the other end of the earth, by this time; or he may be hiding at Hangar Knoll. I'll leave him now and speak of poor Tom. The question that first occurred to me about him was this. Why did he take Mr. Forrester's place that night? Did he do it for

some private end, or did he do it, urged to do it by somebody else, for some great secret reason? We know that he was deeply agitated and in trouble. But the only thing I am convinced of is this. High above all present grief and difficulty, like a beacon light, shone his love for you, Annabel. Life—life was the first and most precious thing that he desired—life to be lived presently with you. None can doubt that. Therefore, to risk his life at such a time would not have occurred to him under any possible circumstances. It is fairly safe to assume that the dead man had no idea whatever of the awful risk he was running when he entered the wood that night—dressed and made up to represent Septimus Forrester."

"I am sure of that, too," said the girl.

"Why he did it and what he intended to do when he reached home in his masquerade, we may never know, unless we find those who helped him," continued Mayne, "for accomplices I believe he must have had. We must, for the moment, leave it at that and concern ourselves with those that shot him. If I am blunt or rough, forgive me, Annabel. You

know right well it is far from my thought to add one pang to all you have had to suffer."

"Speak plainly, Norris. You are doing this for me."

He bowed his head in acknowledgment and resumed.

"Did those villains know they were shooting a man disguised as Septimus Forrester, or did they believe that they were actually shooting Septimus Forrester? It is a very important question, and, again, I cannot see yet the sure answer. But my perception tells me the probable answer. I believe that it was intended to murder Forrester; and that belief is now opening for me the line of inquiry which the police ignored. If there are those in the world who desired to murder Septimus Forrester, they must have a very good reason for wishing to do so. It has never been suggested or supposed that Forrester himself was aware of enemies. The question indeed was asked at the inquest, but his answer was definite. He had no idea that he possessed an enemy in the world, unless, as he added with his strange humour, it might be some one who hated him for his collection of Australian Banksias. I am now about to see

what I can learn of Mr. Forrester, and I approach the task without any sort of prejudice. I have even abandoned it—because it involved the honesty and honour of that man. At present there is not a shadow of ground for doubting them.”

“What was your theory?” she asked; but he would not tell her.

“Wait; you shall know it soon enough if the future seems to justify so grave a fear,” he answered.

Then he asked for her news.

“You had something to tell me?”

“It is this. Mr. Forrester has not filled Tom’s place and writes that he is in no mood to have another man about him at present. He found out our secret, Norris. There were letters from me and he discovered them among Tom’s things and sent for me and was very good to me. He would not have minded the engagement and declares that my dear Tom’s fears were groundless. But that is all one now. Only he likes me, because I liked Tom—so he says—and he wants me to go to Hangar Knoll for the present to do secretary’s work there.”

The other reflected.

"You must go," he said. "There is no doubt of that, Annabel. Go unprejudiced and work unprejudiced—as I intend to do."

"I am prejudiced," she admitted. "I am prejudiced in Mr. Forrester's favour. He said kind things of my dear one. Tom little knew how much Mr. Forrester cared for him."

They talked awhile longer and the girl was better for Mayne's sympathy. She undertook to fall in with Septimus Forrester's proposal and promised Mayne that, in so far as it might be possible, without breaking confidence or spying in her new employment, she would presently observe and relate to him the course of life at Hangar Knoll and the nature of her employer's attitude to the world.

"Do nothing to pain your conscience," he said; "but remember the terrible thing that has happened and recollect that men seldom hate a man enough to murder him until there has arisen a deadly reason for such hate. Mr. Forrester may be the best and worthiest of men, and what we know of him and his pursuits would lead the most suspicious to think so; but strange and terrible things have happened, and you and I feel that we owe it to one, who can defend

himself no more, to explain these strange things if possible. Nothing must stand in our way, Annabel. You are strong and courageous, else I would not advise that you should go to Hangar Knoll; but under the circumstances it is the most natural thing that you should go; and I will say this: the fact that Septimus Forrester has asked you to do so tends to lessen my doubts of the man."

"Sentiment and kindness actuated him," she declared, and the other was in no position to deny it.

"We may be working for him, too," said Mayne. "He is most desirous that this ghastly puzzle should be cleared up, and if I am successful, it may so fall out that Septimus Forrester will be the first to thank me. I could wish for no better sequel than that."



## CHAPTER VII.

### MESSRS. BLAMEY AND CHADGROVE.

Leisure served and Norris Mayne asked for a holiday. He desired if possible to keep his work a secret from his employers, but if necessary he was prepared to tell them concerning it.

Time being granted him, he disappeared from home and took a lodging in London. Yet he spent no little time in Ealing also. He had learned as much concerning Septimus Forrester as possible and was surprised to find the simplicity of the man's life and how few knew anything whatever about him. He scraped acquaintance with a clerk in the offices of the Royal Horticultural Society and also cultivated one or two of the men at Hangar Knoll, when business or pleasure brought them into Ealing. One of these men—a gardener—he often met at a tobacconist's and so became friendly. But none had much to say. Through the gardener, however, Mayne presently got to know an indoor

servant in shape of Tucker, and was invited once to sup with the footman in the servants' hall at Hangar Knoll. The detective lived now in the disguise of a gentleman's gentleman, and described himself as a valet out of employment.

Tucker had no objection to tell what he knew of his master, but it was little. He liked to discuss the recent tragedy, and through him Mayne's fears were quickened and his original theory regained some hold upon his mind.

"I date all," said the man servant, "from the visit of a stranger to master by night."

He gave a description of the man who called himself "B. B." and continued:

"After that, Mr. Preston changed. He'd been more than common cheerful afore; but he got glum and surly as a bear with a sore head after. He was away a lot, and when Mr. Forrester went up north for a week, to see a 'friend's garden, Mr. Tom cleared out too."

"D'you make anything of it? I should think you could put two and two together as quick as most," said Mayne.

"You're right," admitted Tucker. "Not to put too fine a point upon it, I've done that all my life. And I make this of it: that that big,

blustering man, as come in here that night and went away with a flea in his ear, was responsible for a lot of the trouble, if not all."

The detective left him then and took something to think about back to his new lodging in London. Tucker had correctly described the man with whom Mayne had seen Tom Preston walking at Camden Town shortly before his death. Even to the maimed hand all was clear enough, and Norris now knew that one, who at least had been present at the murder of Preston, had seen and spoken, not only with the dead man himself but also with Septimus Forrester before the murder.

Further talks with Tucker enabled him to learn Forrester's movements in so far as they appeared. The horticulturist of late had been little to London, but his alarm was now wearing off and he had resumed his usual course of life. Twice a week he walked to Ealing Common station on the District Railway, and twice a week he returned in the evening therefrom. The only difference in his life was this: that he always drove back from the station in his motor car instead of walking back through the

grounds, according to his custom before the murder.

Mayne now set about the business of finding what took the master of Hangar Knoll thus regularly to London. He was lodging near Hammersmith at present and, from that station, picked up the Ealing train that brought Forrester to London twice a week. At Hammersmith he entered a third class carriage, alighted for a moment at each station to see that Forrester did not leave the train, and discovered at last that the man whose movements he now desired to shadow was in the habit of getting out at different stations when he reached London. In time he learned that a black motor car was always waiting for Mr. Forrester, and the car was always driven by the same hand. The chauffeur was a small, clean-shaven and shrivelled man, in build like a jockey—stunted and hard and elderly. His face was brown and gnarled as old wood; his teeth were yellow; a laugh for ever dwelt upon his lips and his black, beady eyes were never still. He wore a quiet, black uniform banded with dark green.

To trace the destination of the car was difficult without employing another car to follow it,

and since it seldom came to meet Mr. Forrester at the same station two days running, Mayne could not easily hit on the necessary device. Twice or thrice he contrived to be near Mr. Forrester's motor when he entered it, but not until this had happened on several occasions did a word pass between the master and his driver. As a rule they never spoke; but for once Forrester made a remark before getting into the vehicle.

"Not Link Court—15 Sloane Street," he said.

On this occasion the car had met him at Sloane Square Station, and it quickly vanished down Sloane Street at his command. Mayne went to a post office, looked up a directory and found that 15 Sloane Street was the residence of a dentist, and that Link Court might be found in that congeries of business offices extending behind the Bank of England. It seemed clear that the driver, unless directed to the contrary, would have taken his master to Link Court, and the detective guessed that there must lie the usual destination of Septimus Forrester on the days that he visited London.

To prove the truth or error of this surmise

was easy enough. Mayne came up on the next of Mr. Forrester's London days at an hour considerably before that gentleman was due, and he had inspected Link Court very thoroughly ere the arrival of the black motor. But arrive it did, and Mayne, in a loafer's kit with unshorn chin, battered hat, and a red handkerchief round his collarless neck, walked past the car as the door opened.

A man alighted from it and ran up the steps of a building in the middle of the court. But it was not Septimus Forrester. Mayne marked a clean-shaven, alert figure with quick, resolute mien and energy and determination stamped all over him—a man in colour and manner younger and absolutely different from the round-backed and slow-moving horticulturist. There was none else in the car and it drove away. The detective waited for the alert man to reappear, but he did not. The place of business which he had entered was No. 3 Link Court, the office of Messrs. Blamey and Chadgrove, Financiers—a firm with which, on behalf of others, the detective had already fought a losing battle.

On two subsequent occasions Mayne awaited the arrival of the motor here, and on each it

arrived punctually. But it never carried Septimus Forrester. Instead, the active, keen man with close lips and bright blue eyes emerged from it. He wore a top hat and heavy fur coat, and it was clear that he belonged to the firm of No. 3 Link Court. He stayed at work there until four in the afternoon and was then called for and driven away in Mr. Forrester's motor car.

To trace the car back to some unknown destination from this certain starting-place was easy, and Mayne, hiring a taxi-cab and himself driving it, waited at the corner of Link Court and followed Forrester's vehicle. He had seen the stranger enter the car and he never lost sight of it until it drew up outside Earl's Court Station. But it was Septimus Forrester and not the representative of Messrs. Blamey and Chadgrove who then alighted from it. He spoke a word to the driver and the car drove off. Thrice this happened and Mayne was faced with the discovery that the great horticulturist of Ealing controlled or participated in the affairs of the firm of Messrs. Blamey and Chadgrove, Financiers, and that he habitually took the most extraordinary pains to conceal the fact. His rea-

sons for such elaborate deceit the detective could not guess, and though he judged that the firm itself might be in ignorance that Septimus Forrester was their principal, the probability that among the clerks might be some, or at least one, who knew it, occurred to him, and he endeavoured to learn what he could from them.

The firm was of twenty years' standing and of bad fame. Blamey and Chadgrove were money lenders. Their staff changed repeatedly and Mayne found that only young men worked here. There were no old servants and there was no firm. He made friends with a clerk at a luncheon bar and learned that one man only represented the business. His real name was said to be Blamey, but his staff of five knew nothing of him and cared less. He paid well, signed his cheques and banked in the name of Ernest Walter Blamey, was a hard man and made a great deal of money by extortion. Neither the youth who told Mayne these facts, nor any of his colleagues knew more than that concerning their master. He always arrived in a black motor car driven by a man with a face like a brown monkey. He worked from ten until four twice a week and then departed as he



came. He never kept a clerk more than two years, and none of them had ever learned anything concerning his private life or home. Once or twice opportunity had offered to seek information from the driver of the car; but none had ever won any from him. He was an Australian and would gladly talk and tell wonderful stories of his young days as a gold-seeker in Coolgardie, but, concerning his master, he had nothing to tell and indeed professed absolute ignorance.

Yet in this little man who drove the car, Mayne knew must lie larger knowledge of the money lender; and him he now set out to cultivate. For the present he kept the strange discovery of the double life of Septimus Forrester to himself. As yet he lacked the knowledge to explain it; but he hoped the chauffeur, whose name was stated to be Thorndike, might be able to help him. Cautiously he approached the car-driver, to find him apparently very easy of access. He was amiable—a braggart and boaster and full of entertaining stories concerning his past; but Mayne soon diagnosed a man within a man. Thorndike, with all his fun and garrulity, wore a mask behind which it took the detec-

tive many days to penetrate. He believed, however, that here lay the only possible channel into the mystery of Preston's death and he spared neither time nor patience in pursuit of it.

His holiday was ended; but he applied for an extension and received it, upon the understanding that important work conducive to the credit of his firm occupied him.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE THEORY OF NORRIS MAYNE.

There was nothing explicitly criminal in the double life of Septimus Forrester; yet a course so strange and so unusual led Mayne to take grave views and suspect this man of being a rascal. That he might desire to hide the sources of his wealth was natural; but such extraordinary precautions were unnatural. No man would be at pains to disguise himself for the greater part of his life, assume age and a stoop, wear a white wig and blue glasses, unless some very urgent need existed for such a disguise. So, at least he argued, and, when next he met with Annabel Grey, explained to her his fears. They were not founded on any sure ground, for the motive of Preston's murder was hidden and the certainty that he had been intentionally murdered did not exist. None the less Norris Mayne believed that it was so; and he stated his theory of the course of events to Annabel.

"I believe," he said, "that Forrester, know-

ing his life to be in danger, arranged with Preston to impersonate him. I read this mystery to mean that Forrester knew his secretary would be murdered on that night; but why, if he knew that his death was planned, he did not attack those who meant to accomplish it, I cannot say."

To his surprise Annabel took a definite and contrary opinion. She had been at Hangar Knoll for a week and she spoke with enthusiasm of her employer.

"Norris, you are mistaken," she assured him. "I'm stupid, I know, and have no right to question your deeper understanding. Why Mr. Forrester is disguised, for instance, I cannot pretend to say. But this I know: a woman's heart makes few mistakes."

He shook his head.

"Few mistakes on questions of right and wrong," she continued. "Mr. Forrester is a good man and does many good things. He is charitable and soft-hearted. The claims on him are few, yet he recognises many more than most rich men would be disposed to admit. He cared very much for my Tom. He has been terribly tried by his death. He has been very considerate and very sympathetic to me. Nor-

ris, I cannot hear you say any unkind things of Mr. Forrester. We must speak of people as we find them."

Her attitude astonished him, but he made every allowance for it.

"I understand how you feel, Annabel, and yet you must be loyal to me, too, and loyal to the one who has gone. If Mr. Forrester is all you think, then it will be beyond my power to find out any evil concerning him; but I have told you that he, in his own person, represents the sinister firm of Blamey and Chadgrove, and have told you that as Blamey and Chadgrove he has done hard and cruel things. That much is a matter of fact beyond a possibility of doubt."

She flushed and was obstinate.

"I will not take it for granted at all; and I will not judge a man behind his back. This I know: that Mr. Forrester has been very, very good to me."

The man changed his line of approach.

"You have nothing to tell me then?"

"Nothing that can discredit him."

"So much the better, Annabel. You must not be vexed with me. I have no desire to prove

any man a knave. We will rather believe him all you think and abandon my theory for the present. Tell me now how it is with you and your life there. Are you to be a confidential secretary, or merely the writer of his public correspondence?"

"I do nothing of a confidential nature."

"Do you see visitors for him—the garden-people and so on?"

"No—the head gardener does that. He is very busy—Mr. Forrester, I mean—and works very hard himself."

"He shows no fear and does not believe himself in danger?"

"Not now. I ventured to ask that, when first I came, and he discussed the matter openly and put to me many questions concerning Tom. He was frightened at first and admitted that he was. But he says that it has been borne in upon him that the danger has passed, and that there will be no more attempts made against him. He still hopes earnestly that the truth may come to light. He is a religious-minded man, Norris. He believes in a world to come."

"He is happier, then, than he was, and goes about his affairs without fear?"

"Yes. He even walks home after dark from Ealing Common, as he used to do. He has no longer any fear."

"Think now, Annabel, if there is anything about Hangar Knoll or your life there that you ought to tell me. Has Mr. Forrester a valet or any body servant who enjoys his confidence?"

"None, he does everything himself. Nobody here has the faintest idea that he is disguised. I can hardly believe it myself."

"Nevertheless it is true. His very name may not be his own."

"There is a variety of an Australian bush plant actually called after him—Calistemon Forresteri."

Mayne shrugged his shoulders.

"You can think of nothing to tell me, Annabel—nothing that may help me?"

"Nothing, Norris. I feel that this awful crime was outside Mr. Forrester's life entirely, and most firmly I believe him to be the best of men."

There was silence between them and Mayne felt something almost akin to antagonism in the girl's voice. He judged of Forrester's strength of character and mesmeric influence, and guessed

that such a man did not lack for the subtle power that controls and dominates others. But he had not expected to see it exercised in this direction. There was a mystery here, and he wondered why the master of Hangar Knoll had been at such pains to ingratiate himself with Annabel. That he had very completely won her loyalty, even in the brief space of a week, was clear. But his reason for so doing Mayne could not understand. He left her now and went away anxious for her. He believed that Forrester was an accomplished knave; but more he could not see. Still he groped in the darkness.

It was after this interview that the young detective turned his attention to the driver of Forrester's London motor car and contrived to win a measure of the little man's friendship. Already he knew him; but now cultivated him carefully and strove to learn something of the relation between him and his master.

Waiting one day at Link Court for the arrival of the car, a startling development of his own theory confronted Mayne. From a point out of sight he watched Forrester leave the car, undisguised as usual, and then observed that



another man followed him. It was the burly, vociferous stranger whom he had seen near Camden Town with Tom Preston. The men went into Forrester's office together and Mayne came forward and bade the driver of the car "Good morning." They were now established acquaintances and the detective had given himself out as one Wilson—in temporary employment as night-watcher at an office. He was off duty at this hour.

"Haven't got much time to-day, sonny," said Thorndike, winking his small, bright eye; "but we can nip round the corner and have a drop to keep the cold out. The governor don't want me till eleven."

Mayne walked past the car and proceeded to a small public house fifty yards distant; while the other drove to a court-yard behind the office of his master. There he left the motor and presently joined Mayne.

Tim Thorndike was a colonial born and Mayne had summed him up for a genial, vain, good-tempered coward. He had no principle whatever and admitted that no course of action came amiss to him. He narrated adventures of the most disgraceful character without

a blush and it was Mayne's tolerance before these confessions and his praise and adulation that won the man to familiarity.

"I like you," he said, "because there's no beastly virtue about you. I'll tell you things that will make your hair curl some day. I've always been a bit of a wonder, though you'd never think it to look at me."

"You're the most wonderful man that ever I struck," declared the detective, skilful to ponder to the other's vanity. "Your adventures would fill a book. You've gone through enough to kill a dozen men."

"Yes I have," admitted Thorndike, "and I've gone through enough to string up a dozen men, too. Coolgardie taught me a thing or two. There were three of us in the good old days—pardners. A sultry lot, sonny! 'The Three Knaves' they used to call us. The other two went down. They made the world too hot for 'em. One was lynched and t'other shot himself, to save some other chaps the trouble. But I got through. The fox can go where the hound can't, you see; and 'tis no good being undersized, like me, if you don't make use of

it. I can pack myself in a mighty small place still, though all of seventy year old."

"I suppose you met the gov'nor in Australia then?"

"No, I didn't. He's never been in Australia in his life that I know. I applied to drive the car—one of twenty that did—and he took me for my credentials. Forged they was, but pretty reading. He don't know the man I've been, or he'd not trust me a yard. He's all for honesty and all that."

This was a typical fragment of the sort of speech that Mayne won from Thorndike. By pretending absolute indifference to any sort of morality, he made the little man talk; but the detective knew that what he heard was only partly the truth. Thorndike lied habitually and from mixed motives. So at least Mayne suspected. The Australian often told truth mingled with falsehood and falsehood mixed with truth. He was picturesque in his narratives and strove always to be his own hero. Some of the stories sounded veracious enough; and some bore evidence of falsehood.

"That must have been a pretty thrilling time in Coolgardie. What did you do when your

pals were done for? Was you the captain of the gang?"

"No, no. I couldn't hold a candle to him. They took him out and lynched him; and they thought they'd shot me; but I laid doggo and pretended to be dead and wasn't scratched. And t'other chap—he polished himself off, though I never should have thought he'd got the pluck to do it. There's a story about him. In fact 'twas part of the final row, when everybody got shooting and our little party was burst up. 'Bully Bottom' he was called—no harm in mentioning his name now, for he's been dead thirty year. We was great at cards, you see, and our boss played, and 'Bully' would look over t'other chaps' hands and signal with his fingers on the table.

"Euchre and polker were the favourite games, and we made tons of money at 'em. Pleasanter than sweating at the digging, though I always liked the digging myself and they called me 'The Knave of Spades' in consequence. And 'Bully' was 'The Knave of Clubs,' because he was a fighter. But there came a hand at cards that spoiled his usefulness and ended his life.

"He was signalling to the boss as usual and

another on-looker—a stranger as had seen the thing done afore—tumbled to it. He'd got no quarrel with 'Bully,' but all the same he let on about it quietly to another digger; and that chap—a fierce devil he was, with a big down on 'Bully'—he said nothing but took out his jack knife—a big bowie with a heavy blade. And when 'Bully' was gaily signaling with two fingers on the table and puffing his cigarette with t'other hand and looking in the faces of the people as if he was the soul of honesty, that chap brought his great knife down on my pal's outstretched fingers, like the crack of doom, and took 'em off as clean as a meat-chopper. Then the fur flew and 'Bully' bolted with his flipper under his arm, and they took out our boss and killed him, and thought they'd put a bullet through me, but I got down under the table and when they looked for me I'd wriggled out and was off. And 'Bully'—when they went for him—was found shot with his own iron. So that was the end of 'The Three Knaves.' I daresay there's old men in Coolgardie remember us yet."

"And you became a reformed character, Tim?"

Mr. Thorndike patted his nose.

"Oh, yes," he said, "honesty is the best policy—when you come to be my age."

Sublimely unconscious of the thing that he had done, the little man prepared to depart.

"I'll tell you some more yarns about 'The Three Knaves' some day," he said, "because you understand 'em and you might have been a bit of an artist yourself, if you'd been trained to it. There's more hawk than pigeon in your nature, but your education has been neglected. Now I must away."

Long after he had gone, the other sat with his eyes staring at nothing. These tremendous trifles told so airily by the old sinner meant great things to Norris Mayne. A dawn of light was thrown upon many problems centering around the main mystery. For once his knowledge of certain facts enabled him to separate lies from truth in Thorndike's racy narrative. He began to see Thorndike himself as he had not yet seen him, and he began to see a greater than Thorndike.

## CHAPTER IX.

### MR. FORRESTER NEEDS A DETECTIVE.

That Septimus Forrester and the man known as 'Bully Bottom,' or 'B. B.,' were jointly responsible for the murder of Tom Preston, Mayne now entertained but little doubt. Indeed he guessed that it might have been Forrester himself who fired the shot, concealed himself for a while afterwards, and then chose the dramatic moment to reappear in the billiard room beside the corpse of the man he had murdered. This theory fitted the facts, so far as Mayne had gathered them, and he proceeded in his endeavour to win closer intimacy with Thorndike, as the man who probably held the key of the puzzle.

But upon the subject of his master, Thorndike either knew nothing or chose to tell nothing. He declared that Forrester came and went from London Bridge station and that he believed he dwelt at Chislehurst. He added other statements that Mayne's private knowl-

edge made clear were lies, and he never alluded to the fact that Forrester donned his Ealing disguise in the motor car, entering it as Septimus Forrester and leaving it as the principal of Messrs. Blamey and Chadgrove. But the listener discounted the Australian's falsehoods and was content, as time went on, to glean, piece by piece, the scraps of truth he scattered through his romances.

Thorndike would never permit Mayne to enter the motor, though Norris suggested doing so; but he allowed him once to drive upon the box, when off duty, and evidently entertained no suspicion that his new friend was other than he seemed.

Mayne called at Thorndike's dwelling and found it commodious and comfortable. The little man implied that he was doing his present work for a need of occupation rather than necessity; and this seemed obviously apparent, for he lived in ease and his small house off the Edgeware Road showed clearly that he possessed more than sufficient means to gratify his simple tastes. He was a bachelor, and an elderly woman looked after his requirements, cooked his food and mended his clothes. He



bragged about his money to Mayne and implied that the world would be much astonished to learn how much he really possessed.

Stories of "the boss" of "The Three Knaves" Thorndike often told; but, in this connection he was very careful not to identify his present master with the old one. That link in the chain, however, Mayne established for himself. He believed that under his personal observation he had now got two of the three rascals whose band had been broken up at Coolgardie, thirty or more years before. Of two he was, indeed, sure; but whether Forrester might in truth be "the boss" of many of Thorndike's stories, he could not be positive; while as for "Bully Bottom", while he doubted not that this was the huge man whom he had seen both with Preston and with Forrester, for the time the giant had disappeared. Mayne had inquired who he might be, on the day that he left the motor car and entered the offices of Blamey and Chadgrove with Septimus Forrester; but Tim Thorndike professed to know nothing of him and Norris was careful not to push the subject.

Thus his inquiry stood when an event very

unexpected threatened to ruin the theory upon which he was now working.

A letter reached his Ealing address. It came from Septimus Forrester himself and begged that Norris Mayne would call at Hangar Knoll without delay upon a painful matter of immediate importance.

That he was discovered and in danger immediately occurred to Mayne. He had not heard from Annabel for some days and felt confident that she was not aware of this communication from her employer. But it struck the detective that perhaps accidentally, and with the absolute trust she reposed in Septimus Forrester, Annabel had mentioned his name and explained how, as an old friend of Preston's, he was working to decipher the mystery of her lover's death. Without arousing the woman's suspicions, Forrester would doubtless seek closer acquaintance with Mayne as soon as these facts came to his ears. And that closer acquaintance could not breed good to the detective.

He did not hesitate, however. He had now returned to regular work, while still keeping his London room; and he left letters at his office, to be opened if he did not return on the follow-

ing morning, put a revolver in his pocket and waited upon Septimus Forrester as directed.

But his fears of any personal violence proved groundless. Forrester, in his assumed part of a bent and short-sighted man seventy years old, showed most active concern and tribulation. Moreover the source of his anxiety was very vital to Mayne himself, for it concerned Anna-bel Grey.

"I must tell you that your name was familiar to me," began the horticulturist, "for my adopted son, Preston, whose dreadful end you know, spoke more than once to me concerning you and your work. I am weary of the Scotland Yard people, for their failure to explain the greatest sorrow in my life was absolute. They are frauds and dullards. And now, suddenly, another trouble has come upon me. It looks as though my affection brought a curse with it."

He spoke in hard metallic tones, but there was a ring of feeling in his voice, and Mayne, as yet ignorant of the great matter to be broken upon his ears, could not help feeling admiration for what he guessed to be supreme acting.

"There is a lady," continued Forrester, "whose name is Miss Annabel Grey."

It was now the other's turn to act, and he did so. Not a muscle, not a tremor of his deep, watchful eyes, betrayed his interest.

"It came to my ears after Mr. Preston's death that this young woman was privately engaged to him. The silly creatures kept their secret from me. I discovered the secret, however, when going through my dead boy's papers. He feared that I should object to the alliance and hid it from me. This young woman had done a good deal of typewriting work for us, and interest had ripened into affection between her and my secretary. Learning the fact, I sent for her in hope to find some clue to the tragedy of his death. But she knew nothing. She was much upset and unnerved, and I felt powerless to bring any comfort to her bruised heart. If she had been an injured tree or shrub I should have known better how to proceed. Nevertheless I devoted much thought to her sad case and, after an interval, it occurred to me to bring her here as a temporary secretary. Thus I killed two birds with one stone, for my affairs had been

long in abeyance. She came, and I found her an attractive, sensible, clever and distinguished woman. These are unusual adjectives, but deserved. It is not too much to say that my own grief was somewhat allayed by her presence. Certainly I never met one of her sex and age so understanding and sympathetic. Our shared sorrow drew us together without a doubt. May comforted December; if you will pardon the poetry."

He stopped and sighed.

"Excuse these details, but they may assist you in your search for her."

"She has left you?"

"She has gone. May has taken wing. I will not say that she has left me of her own will. I do not think so. But she has disappeared absolutely, and I fail to trace her. Her aunt, Mrs. Fane, with whom she resides in Ealing, only knows that she left home to come here at the usual hour the day before yesterday. But she did not return. And I only know that she did not come here the day before yesterday and had not since been seen or heard of. No communication of any sort has been received from her. She has vanished into thin air and both

her aunt and I are in the deepest concern. Of course such things don't happen and it is all very absurd and melodramatic. Still facts are facts and she has disappeared.

"You want me to find her, Mr. Forrester?"

"I do indeed. You have a reputation for great skill and acumen in these affairs, so I beg you will play the bloodhound on my behalf—at your own fee."

Mayne considered. It was clear that the man before him had not heard his name from Annabel; but he doubted not that Annabel's aunt, Mrs. Fane, had mentioned him. It might also be true that in the past Tom Preston had done so.

"I may add," continued Forrester, "that Miss Grey has her private room as well as her work room here, and occasionally she stops the night. She cheers my loneliness in this manner not a little. I even attempted to teach her chess; but surely, surely that well-meant futility was not cause sufficient to make her run away?"

"I will do what I can at once. I will see Mrs. Fane tonight."

"Spare no expense. My own dreadful fear is that she has met with an accident. She was

'fond of taking an evening stroll sometimes. I dreaded a catastrophe in connection with the lily pond and even had it dragged today. Thank God it was empty—save for the unlovely cadavers of certain cats, whose owners shall be nameless."

"I'll do what I can," repeated Mayne and rose to take his leave.

"Let me know at once if any information reaches you and if I can assist your search. I feel this matter quite deeply. The young lady had already grown to be more to me than a secretary—a beautiful, restful creature. She might even have been a botanist in time. My opinion is that Providence seeing her promise in that direction swept the disturbing element of love out of her life, so that she might come to the problems of the higher flora with a free mind."

Forrester shook hands and his hand was cold and hard. It was difficult to know whether he felt anxious and adopted his cynicism as a mask, or whether in reality he cared nothing and was laughing in his sleeve.

The servants at Hangar Knoll did not know Mayne in his frock coat and black hat, and

Tucker, who let him out of the hall door, was quite unaware of his identity.

To Mrs. Fane he went, but learnt no more than he knew already.

"My niece often stopped for a night or two at Hangar Knoll, but when she did not come home on the second day, I walked up to see her. And all I heard was that she hadn't been there. Mr. Forrester was out at the time, but he came to see me, as soon as he got home. 'Twas he that mentioned you to me, or I should not have spoken of you to him. But he'd heard of you through poor Tom Preston and sent for you immediately."

The old woman was in deep distress and could help Mayne in no way. She was able to form no theory whatever of Annabel's disappearance, but felt sure that it must have been compulsory, since she had heard nothing to explain it and received no intelligence to allay her fears. She, too, had marked Forrester's concern and doubted not for an instant that it was genuine.

To his great thankfulness, however, on returning home the harassed man found a letter waiting for him with the direction in Annabel's writing. But the communication was of the



briefest and had been written in violent haste:

"Tell my aunt that all is well with me. *Do nothing more at all.* I will write when possible. A. G."

Thus the man and all his secret hopes were crushed together. It was long before he recovered from the blow of this communication, for it meant death to his living dreams and the picture of the time to come that his heart already painted. Annabel, too clearly, had ceased to trust him, to care for him, to desire his support and assistance. She had placed herself in other hands, and others were working for her now. She commanded him curtly to cease from his labours.

A great chapter of Mayne's life seemed to close with the reading of those strange words, and far into the night he considered what this message might mean. For long he refused to accept its face value and believed the message was written under compulsion. But his powers of concentration failed at last; he grew very weary; the problem crushed him and he felt powerless to strive with its complexities.

He slept at dawn for a brief while; then rose with rested brains to fight again.

## CHAPTER X.

### "B. B.'S" APPOINTMENT.

On the following morning Mayne examined Annabel's letter very carefully and found that the postmark was Bath. His work had taken him hither on a previous occasion and he knew the city well.

The problem uppermost in his mind concerned Septimus Forrester and how much it might be desirable at this juncture to tell him. He determined for the present to say nothing, and a day later, receiving no further communication from Annabel, he went to Bath in search of her. But first he visited Mrs. Fane and heard that Miss Grey was not unfamiliar with the old health resort.

"There's a very famous Botanical Garden there," she exclaimed; "and Annabel was sent down about a week ago for the day to visit it. She went for Mr. Forrester concerning plants, and took some things down with her and brought some things back. It was the head

gardener's work, I believe, but he had fallen sick and her employer made a favor of it to Annabel."

"Did she say much about the matter when she returned?"

"No; she came back looking terribly ill and suffering from a nervous headache. She would eat nothing and went to bed at once. She was not herself and seemed prostrated and overwhelmed. She never mentioned the matter again and declared the next day that she had quite recovered."

"She never mentioned it to me either," he said. "Has she acted differently since in any way?"

"Not to me; but she utterly changed to Mr. Forrester—changed in her mind to him. She never discussed him again and would not allow me to do so."

Mayne went to Bath and spent two days there. He made every inquiry possible and sought where he deemed the hidden girl might be found. The chase was a forlorn one, since a thousand possibilities existed that she might have left Bath before his advent—if indeed she had ever herself stopped there. He was quite

unable to explain her actions and knew no men or women in her life with which she could be associated in this extraordinary line of conduct.

Chance, however, willed that he actually saw Annabel at Bath and it had been better for his peace had he not done so. At dusk on the second day, he was returning to the station after his fruitless search when he passed a hansom being driven rapidly in the opposite direction. It contained a man and a woman, and marking the woman first his eyes did not leave her until it was too late to notice the man. Of him, all he could visualize was a big slouch hat and beard. But the woman was Annabel—Annabel haggard and unhappy—Annabel very pale and agitated—either listening to her companion or pleading with him. The vision lasted but a second and then was gone; yet it seemed to confirm her letter; it showed most definitely that Annabel Grey, if in distress, was in no immediate danger. Moreover he felt certain that she had seen him—so certain that he expected the hansom to be stopped. But it was not arrested and quickly disappeared.

The man felt overpowered and made no immediate effort to follow her. He put his own

emotion before the duty upon which he was supposed to be engaged for a client. He forgot Forrester and his alleged wishes to learn the meaning of the secretary's actions. He only remembered himself and his hopes and desires and ambitions. They fell to earth slain before this discovery. For here was the woman, alone in a strange place with an unknown man—one of whom she had never spoken about to him—a man, therefore, who could have only come into her life at the most recent date. He had known many instances of infatuation, but they never happened to such a woman as Annabel. That she had fallen victim to a stranger was a monstrous thought and he dismissed the idea with impatience. But that she had turned from him to another; that another man, unknown to him, was now controlling her destiny and influencing her to do most amazing actions, there could be no doubt. How had he acquired that influence? What manner of man might he be to achieve these extraordinary results in so short a space of time? Mayne could not tell. He only knew that these things came as a death blow to the ambition of his own life.

Concerning Forrester he did not think again,

but he was reminded of him by another urgent letter which awaited him on his return. The master of Hangar Knoll complained that he had heard nothing, desired to see Mayne at his earliest convenience and specified a time on the following evening. He kept the appointment and, indeed, arrived of set purpose half an hour too soon. Mr. Forrester happened to be in the grounds visiting one of his great houses erected for the cultivation of Australian sylvia; but a messenger hastened to inform him that Mayne had arrived. The detective determined for the present to say nothing concerning his success, for the invincible distrust of Forrester in every connection dominated his mind, and he had no wish to assist him in his search for Annabel. Indeed he suspected that Forrester knew everything and was only employing him as a blind. He could not even be sure that it was not Forrester himself he had seen with her at Bath. That the girl had gone out of his own life forever he believed; but he did not know whether she had really left Forrester at all and felt little need of helping the horticulturist to find her.

For five minutes he was left alone in the

study of Hangar Knoll. He had come half an hour earlier than the time specified by his employer, and this premeditated accident proved pregnant of results.

Hearing that Septimus Forrester was in the gardens and calculating that some minutes at least must elapse before he came to him, Mayne glanced hastily round the study. It was a large, solidly furnished room with heavy book-shelves and illustrations of flowers and shrubs hung upon the walls. A rolled-top desk with an electric light hanging above it stood by the window; and the desk was open, the light burning.

Paying no attention to other matters, Mayne approached this place and swiftly turned over letters and data that littered it. Here were scraps of dried flowers; here, lists of botanical specimens; here, gardeners' catalogues; and here a volume of the transactions of the Royal Horticultural Society. A little gold medal detained Mayne for one moment. It, too, came from the Society, for Septimus Forrester had just won its highest honour and been enrolled a V. M. H. Henceforth he was one of the sixty-three distinguished members of the Society to hold its Victoria Medals.

Leaving each paper exactly as he found it, moving them with swift touch and learning their purport at a glance, the detective had made a very thorough examination in the space of two minutes. His senses were divided, for while he conducted this search with eyes and hands, he kept his ears open for the approaching footfall and was ready at an instant's notice to retreat from the desk and return to a chair by the fire.

The litter of papers yielding nothing, he next drew documents from a nest of pigeon-holes above them and, in moving a dozen of these fastened together with a red elastic ring, he dislodged a separate paper that had been thrust behind them. It was a note written in sprawling hand and the words crossed the page with an upward and sanguine slant. No address appeared on it, but the communication itself indicated future action on the part of the writer and made it possible, if one so desired, both to meet and see him.

"All right. Passage booked in Ortona. Meet you Thursday for stuff at the lily-pond midnight. 'B. B.' To Drake Chalmers."

There was a step at the door; but it came too



late to prevent the detective from securing definite information. He now knew of the time, the place of an appointment between "B. B." and an unknown man; he was also aware that "Bully Bottom" would presently leave England by an Orient Mail Steamer — either for Australia or some intermediate port.

When Septimus Forrester appeared a few moments later, the letter was back in its pigeon-hole, with the packet of documents in front of it, and Norris Mayne rose slowly from warming his hands at the fire. He noticed that Forrester was betrayed into an expression of slight irritation as he entered and walked to his desk. The sign of annoyance was not intended for him, however, and a moment later the horticulturist picked up the gold disc from his desk and showed it to Mayne.

"The Victorian Medal," he said. "On the death of the late Sir Hugh Arundel — a learned fool, but no gardener—a vacancy occurred in the list of sixty-three—sixty-three being the years of the late Victoria's reign, as you know—and I have been chosen to fill it. Once I coveted the distinction. Now, since I have been justly entitled to it for ten years and seen others

receive it over my head, the trinket leaves me cold."

Mayne expressed interest and then the other's manner changed.

"You're earlier than I directed. Consequently I was not here to meet you. Always keep appointments at the exact time they are made, young man. To be too early may be as objectionable as to be too late. You ought to know that in your nasty business."

"I am exceedingly sorry, Mr. Forrester. I came from London. But you are right. I should have stopped until half-past six o'clock and not arrived sooner. I am generally punctilious in the matter of time."

He thought of an appointment concerning which he had just read and rehearsed the exact words of the letter as he looked with deprecation into the blue glasses before him.

"Sit down and tell me if you have learned anything concerning Miss Grey's disappearance."

"I wish exceedingly that I could tell you I had, but I have no news for you. I learn from Mrs. Fane that her niece went for a day to Bath on your account. I have been thinking of

that. Can you tell me what was her business and whether she ever spoke of friends or acquaintances in that town?”

“She did not, and I am not aware that she knew anybody there. Youth has no business or pleasure in Bath. Beau Nash has been dead a long time. She went for me, because my garden director was laid up and I wanted a capable and understanding representative. She has taken swiftly and intelligently to the subject of plants and I was able to trust her, both to carry certain specimens to Bath and choose others from their collection.”

“Thank you, Mr. Forrester. You have no clues?”

“None whatever. I am not a policeman. My anxiety increases. Her silence is the remarkable thing. We were the best of friends and she must be aware that I am greatly exercised on her behalf. The silence, therefore, I read to be enforced. She is in the hands of somebody—probably a rogue. Yet a rogue in Bath sounds absurd. However I feel more than anxious.” He paused and then continued. “I am, moreover, disagreeably reminded of the past. In my own opinion, as I have told the world, my life

was undoubtedly aimed at when poor Preston died; and it occurs to me that my unknown enemy may be active once again and designing some further assault. It is possible to connect her disappearance with a personal enemy."

"She would be loyal to you, no doubt?"

"No doubt at all; but I need not tell a man in your business that an inexperienced, young girl may easily fall a prey to the specious and evil tongue of a designing rascal. Even a detective often finds out things. A hundred possibilities occur to me. She might be even now working to do me great harm, while she was of course deluded all the time into believing the reverse. Do you follow my argument?"

"I do, and it leads to a question, Mr. Forrester. It may or may not be beside the point, but if there exists any man or woman you have reason to regard as an enemy, the knowledge of that man or woman would very likely be of lasting service to me at this juncture and serve to facilitate our search.

To his surprise, Septimus Forrester returned no instant reply. But when he did speak, another blow, and that a severe one appeared to

threaten the detective's theory of Tom Preston's end.

"It is true," said he, "that at the coroner's inquiry I stated definitely I was unaware of any enemy. And it is still true; but in your private ear I might qualify that general truth in some measure. You will understand that I speak to you now under the strictest confidence?"

Mayne bowed.

"There is a man then—an Australian of low origin and ruffianly nature—who has been pestering me lately and entertains some fancied claims upon me. He alleges an acquaintance of thirty years ago; but for my part I can honestly remember no such man. I would rather be on intimate terms with a respectable gorilla or grizzly bear. Yet he is poor and I am rich; and since he was an Australian, and solemnly swears he once found a rare plant for me in the Blue Mountains, I so far acted on an impulse of sentiment as to believe him and give him a five-pound note for charity. He has abused my generosity and become a nuisance. He desires, nay demands, more money, and declares that if I deny it to him, he is prepared to reveal important secrets of my past. Do I look like a man

with a past? Huge though he is, I kicked the rascal out when last he came with this insolent threat; and I have heard nothing more concerning him; but it occurs to me, as barely possible, that this man mountain may have communicated with Miss Grey — though what he could expect to gain by so doing is hard to see. He is ignorant and his clothes are an affront to civilisation."

"Can you describe him?"

"A creature of unusual size and strength. I should think he was sixty years old, if not more. A blustering, bullying person with a tremendous voice and a shocking mind. He wears a large wide-awake hat and you may easily recognise him by one very marked peculiarity: he has lost two fingers from his left hand. How he met with such a dreadful accident I know not. Probably his fingers were in the wrong place at the time of the disaster."

Mayne gasped in secret and wondered at the significance of this move. That Forrester referred to the man "B. B.," there could be no question, for he was at pains most accurately to describe him; but now, even as his motor driver, Thorndike, had done, he mixed truth with

falsehood and suggested a relation between himself and the other Australian which was far less intimate than Mayne knew to exist.

The day was Tuesday. On the following Thursday one Drake Chalmers had a midnight meeting with "B. B." at "the lily pond," and Mayne felt no shadow of doubt that the lily pond referred to was a certain famous expanse of water in Hangar Knoll gardens. That 'Drake Chalmers' must be another name for Forrester himself, he also suspected.

Nevertheless it was possible that much concerning "B. B." was hidden from Forrester, and that his theory that the mysterious man from Australia had won Annabel to his purposes might be correct. He spoke with his usual satiric indifference and it was always difficult to tell when he meant what he said.

"Can you describe the person even more fully?" Mayne asked after a few moments of swift reflection.

"In appearance he is brutal, with a shaggy, yellow moustache, teeth that project and large, sulky eyes. His skin is red and tanned and wrinkled and his head is very bald. He wears a gallows fringe of hair under his chin. But

the rope will need to be a strong one that chokes that man."

"His address?"

"That I cannot tell you. He has been careful to hide it from me. I should much like to know it myself."

Mayne stayed but little longer and took his leave, promising to work upon this line.

"If you hear or see the man again, be sure to let me know, Mr. Forrester. Meantime I shall do all I can to unravel this distressing problem of Miss Grey's disappearance."

"Look for the burlesque of a human being I have described to you and remember that he stands six feet eight inches in his socks. He is, however, the sort of person who might easily not wear socks. Even a professional detective would hardly fail to notice him in a crowd. Good fortune attend your efforts."

Forrester waved the younger man to the door, and the last that Mayne saw of him that night was his bent figure under the electric light and his beautifully modelled hands turning over the Royal Horticultural Society's Victorian Medal of Honour.



## CHAPTER XI.

### EXIT "B. B."

Norris Mayne decided to keep the midnight appointment by Mr. Forrester's lily lake. He knew the spot and guessed that in a garden room, which stood beside the expanse of water, the meeting would take place. This apartment, constructed on the model of a Roman temple opened upon the lake by marble steps, and boats conveyed those who came to see Mr. Forrester's unique collection of hardy water lilies from the steps out on to the water. A bank rose behind the temple, and Mayne, who took care to be at the tryst a full hour before that fixed for the meeting of "B. B." and Drake Chalmers, found that he might lie hidden beside the little building, at a spot whence all that went on within it was easily visible. Here, concealed in a thick undergrowth of ruscus, that rose between the pillars of the temple and the bank behind them on the landward side, Mayne was within two yards of the chairs and table that occupied

the center of the building. He explored cautiously, but used no artificial light. A full moon shone and the lake and the white, still building beside it were very clearly revealed against the nocturnal darkness of the woods.

There was a boat chest in the temple, and it contained cordage, tools and some bottles. A bottle of whiskey, a magnum of champagne, a siphon of aerated water, a large tumbler and a corkscrew were hidden here. It looked as though a carouse had been planned.

And then, punctually on the stroke of midnight, as it died away from a distant church tower, Mayne, now buried in the tangle of ruscus, heard the approach of a heavy man. He came slowly and made strange inarticulate sounds. He seemed suspicious and uncertain. Then the watcher marked a dim, tall form loiter for sometime beside the lake. By degrees it crept to the garden room, entered and sat down in a chair. A light gleamed through the darkness and Mayne saw the new arrival open a bull's eye lantern and put it on the table. Beside it he laid a revolver and so placed himself that his back faced the lake. Thus it was impossible for him to be taken unawares. That he antici-

pated the possibility of an attack was clear. Mayne had leisure to study him in the radius of yellow light cast by the lantern and he was impressed with the immense size, brute force and vitality of the man. He made a mountain of flesh, yet, despite his bulk and age gave the impression of extraordinary physical powers. There was something animal about him and his round red face, bristly mustache, large eyes, yellow teeth and almost pointed ears suggested some unnatural kinship with the greater cats. His head seemed as much tiger as man.

"B. B." looked at his watch and Mayne could hear his heavy breathing. Time passed and none came to him. He lighted a cigar and blew great clouds of smoke. Then still finding himself alone, the big man began to show impatience. He snorted, shifted about, went to the entrance to listen whether any footsteps approached, returned again, and sat down once more by the table.

Presently he brought a pile of letters from his pocket and read one after another. Some he tore up and dropped the fragments of them into the lake; some he returned to his pocket. One he left on the table by his open lantern. This

was the last that he read and it evidently came from the man he designed to meet. It also contained some information of present interest to "Bully Bottom."

"Dammy!" he said aloud. "I'd forgotten that!"

He dropped the letter and taking the lantern threw its light about him. Then to the boat chest he went, opened it, rummaged in its interior and discovered the bottles. He drew them out and looked again. This time he found the corkscrew, the siphon and the tumbler. The man turned his attention to the champagne first, opened the magnum with an explosion and poured out a tumbler of the liquor. He drank it at a draught, then flung away his half smoked cigar and lit another.

Presently, still finding his companion tarried, "Bully Bottom" went for a walk round the lake, and Mayne marked his great form in the moonlight clearly visible, though sunk in the hazes of distance. The letter he had last read still lay open on the table and stealing from his retreat, while the other was two hundred yards away at a bend of the water, the detective made himself acquainted with the contents of it.

*"At the temple by the water on Thursday night. Five thousand in notes and passage money. Expect me as soon after midnight as possible; but I must wait till the house sleeps and may be delayed. Have put some whiskey and wine in the boat chest with corkscrew and siphon. D. C."*

This note had evidently been written in answer to that with which Mayne was already familiar, and the initials D. C. stood doubtless for "Drake Chalmers"—another name for Septimus Forrester. It seemed that some final understanding remained to be completed between them, and that "Bully Bottom," on the strength of a cash payment of five thousand pounds and his passage money, was about to leave England at once, and trouble his former acquaintance no more. The magnitude of the sum struck Mayne. It was obvious that "Bully" held some very strong trump card. He felt sorely tempted now to endeavor to win the confidence of this man; but it was too late. Forrester might be expected at any moment.

He hid again and presently the big man returned. It was now past one o'clock and he began to manifest active impatience. He drank

great draughts from the magnum and exhibited anger and even fear. It was clear that he began to suspect foul play. And then, in a manner very opposite to his suspicion, the reality of foul play was indeed thrust upon him. Mayne saw "Bully" start and press both hands upon his stomach. He looked round wildly and the pang passed. He mopped his forehead, flung away his cigar and sat staring stupidly before him and drawing his breath with immense, deep inhalations. Presently he began to suffer increased physical agonies and to roll backwards and forwards in the chair on which he sat. His hat fell off and he tore away his collar.

"Done me! Done me! By God!" he groaned, and then, giving way to uncontrolled fury, he struck the table with his fist and the solid wood cracked. He fell presently in a paroxysm to the ground, but got up again and sat gasping in his chair. He writhed and twisted and suffered unspeakable agonies as the poison conquered him. Then, seeing the whiskey bottle he broke off the head and was about to drink, but guessed that this, too, was death. Concluding that death awaited him in any case, he drank and nearly finished the bottle. Mayne

watched his dreadful dissolution and heard the bellow of awful agony that he lifted at the end. But he was powerless to save him, though humanity cried to his heart and the sight of this terrible death remained with him for ever. The monster fell for the last time, crawled across the floor and with the fire of death burning his entrails alive, sought to reach the water and plunge into it. But he could not do so. His strength was gone; he drummed feebly with his hands on the marble floor, then sank into stillness. For a while he uttered deep groans and then grew silent. Mayne listened to his breathing, but that soon ceased and "Bully Bottom" was dead.

He lay on his back with his knees drawn up and his hands clenched on his breast. The moonlight touched his huge, twisted face and staring eyes to grotesque hideousness. Upon the table his lantern still burned with the letter beside it; his revolver was in his pocket, for he had picked it up and put it there before he went to walk round the lake.

Mayne prepared to search the dead man, but he was too late, and a moment later he heard someone approaching.

A hundred yards away Forrester already moved, and that shout of agony which marked the murder of his foe was heard by him. Purposely he had delayed the tryst that his scheme might have ample time to work itself out; and the frantic sound echoing through the dead of night told him that his victim had fallen into the simple trap.

Now he came upon the scene. He wore his blue glasses and white wig and moustache, and he was clad in evening dress. He gazed upon his work critically and regarded the great corpse at his feet with the shadow of a smile.

"Well, my poor old boy," he said aloud. "I always told you that your unconquerable thirst for whiskey would be the undoing of you. Did they hurt very much—those twenty drops of Bushman's poison? Alas! from the look of you, I'm afraid they did. Well, well, it's all over now and your thirst quenched for ever. A cool place your body shall have—a cool place down among the water-lilies. But as for your soul, my poor "Bully"—if soul you have, I cannot say what temperature that may be called upon to endure!"

Then he began carefully to search the dead



body. The papers and letters from "Bully Bottom's" pocket he put into his own, and he appeared to examine the corpse closely with scientific eyes to judge of the work of the poison. Next Forrester cleaned up the chamber, flung the bottles into the pond and washed away the bloodstains, where the dead man had beaten his hands on the floor. The tumbler he broke and sank in the lake; the siphon and corkscrew he returned to the chest. With a rope, as men drag a slaughtered pig, he drew "Bully" to the edge of the water and then he went off along the lake side and was absent for twenty minutes. He returned in a large punt across the water and made the vessel fast, fore and aft, at the marble steps. Next, with some labour, he dragged over the mass of his murdered man and prepared to pole out again into the deep water at the midst of the lake. But first he fastened heavy stones to the arms and legs of the dead and lashed them to him with wire, so that no accident should unloose them.

He moved out then and, under the waning moonlight, Mayne saw him sink the corpse in the midst of the pond and presently pole the punt back whence he had brought it. Again he

returned and made a further careful scrutiny of the place, using "Bully Bottom's" lantern to do so. He found the dead man's wide-brimmed hat and fetched a stone and sank it in the water. Lastly Forrester donned his coat and waistcoat, which he had taken off before these operations, then flinging the lantern into the water, he went his way and disappeared in the direction of Hangar Knoll House.

The detective waited long before he moved. It seemed to him that he had been sitting through that night in a play-house watching a drama of death. Its reality was not the point impressed upon him. He had watched all these horrors with scarcely any emotion. He believed that he had actually been moved more on some occasions in a theatre than by this hideous drama of real life. He continued in a dream and it was only by an effort of will that he began to analyse the situation and the radical changes which this deliberate murder had wrought in it.

His suspicions of Forrester were at least confirmed. He had now finally settled with one of his old accomplices and the "Knave of Clubs"

had gone to answer to his account. There remained the "Knave of Spades," for so Thorn-dike had declared that he was called, and the arch-knave, whom he had seen that night burying his dead. Forrester lay now in his power; but to what purpose? The murder of Tom Preston was made none the clearer by this circumstance; but that Forrester had indeed murdered him, with this dead man's help, Mayne now most steadfastly believed.

As he returned home, creeping out at Hangar Knoll grounds by the fields at the bottom of them, and then walking for some distance along the metals of the Great Western Railway, he reflected on the utter futility thus far of his own presence in these events. He had discovered little, done nothing and reached scarcely nearer to the mystery of Tom Preston's death than when he started. He believed, indeed, that he now knew Preston's murderer and had seen Forrester or Chalmers, destroy the witness of it, since "Bully Bottom" had assuredly been present when Preston fell; but even this theory might be mistaken and, right or wrong, he had as yet no shadow of truth strong enough to inculcate

Septimus Forrester. Time, indeed, actually disproved this theory itself and showed that Preston's assassin had to be sought in a quarter amazingly different; but for the present Mayne clung to his belief as the only light in a problem still very obscure. Forrester was now at his mercy, but he had no intention of taking any active steps against him until his case was more advanced.

For the present he felt that it would be wise to turn again to the man Thorndike and strengthen an acquaintance that he had of late neglected. Concerning Annabel, the cruel certainty still dwelt with him that he could do nothing. She did not need his help and would doubtless resent any further intervention from him, since she had explicitly declared that it was her wish he should take no further steps in the mystery of her betrothed's sudden and dreadful death.

He sought Thorndike, therefore, with purpose to burrow deeper into the confidences of the Australian and win from him more particulars concerning the career of "the boss" of "The Three Knaves." Mayne had been careful never

to suggest that he associated the head of the firm of Blamey and Chadgrove with this grim centre figure of Thorndike's Australian experiences; but he now desired if possible to hear the little man speak at greater length of his hero, Drake Chalmers.

## CHAPTER XII.

### A DAY ON THE RIVER.

Norris Mayne reviewed the knowledge now acquired of the trinity that Thorndike had described as "The Three Knaves," and having done so, sought the motor driver in hope to fill some of the blanks. That the fate of Tom Preston was involved in the later story of these men he did not doubt. Indeed he felt positive that Thorndike knew it, together with much else concerning the murder of Forrester's secretary; but whether Annabel Grey's disappearance would prove to be part of the same series of events, or the result of other circumstances, he could not judge. He inclined to divide the two incidents and believed that in the matter of the woman, Forrester played no part but was genuinely concerned and mystified. His motives for being concerned, however, were uncertain and consideration of them found Mayne once more in two minds. For Forrester himself had sus-

pected that his enemies might have won Annabel away for their own ends. But that he had any enemies now remaining was a matter of doubt. The man he had cited explicitly, he had dealt with himself; though there might still be others of whom he went in fear.

The tangle transcended any within the detective's experience, because so great a network of falsehood had been mingled with the truth. To winnow the chaff from the grain was his ceaseless task; but upon renewing relations with Thorndike, in the light of his increased knowledge, this difficulty became slightly less acute in certain directions. For he knew of the murder of "Bully Bottom" and guessed that Thorndike was also familiar with the fact.

Mayne visited Forrester twice during the next fortnight but only to report with regret that he had nothing to tell concerning Annabel. From the girl's aunt he also hid his knowledge, though poor Mrs. Fane suffered sadly in her loss. But she was a garrulous woman and he dared not yet reveal to her his adventure at Bath. She believed very thoroughly in Mr. Forrester and would have much resented the fact that this discovery was concealed from him.

She might, indeed, have taken it upon herself to tell him.

After the extinction of "Bully Bottom," Mayne visited Scotland Yard to consult the list of persons missing. He desired to see if the Australian's disappearance had occasioned concern in other quarters. But none answering at all to his description figured there.

Annabel Grey's name confronted him, indeed, and he sighed secretly as he read it. For the rest there were but a few recent names in the record of mystery. Three other human beings only had vanished from their homes and haunts within the past few months—three only whose disappearance had been notified and recorded.

One Noel Turner had disappeared from Ellesmere in Shropshire; one Sophie Blandford was gone from Plympton in Devonshire; and another woman, Jane Mary Snell, was reported missing from Sunderland.

Then came a day when Norris Mayne made holiday with Timothy Thorndike. To further his own hopes and increase their friendship, Mayne invited the motor driver to go upon the river with him, because Thorndike declared himself a great oar and spoke often of past em-



ployment as a waterman on the River Hawkesbury, in New South Wales. Extreme caution still marked Thorndike's narratives, and to the student of psychology it was interesting to note how vanity and inclination to brag on the one hand were held in check by the natural cunning and reticence of an old criminal on the other. But the detective hit on a means to win to a franker exposition of Thorndike's past, by detailing certain imaginary secrets of his own. For the listener's benefit he confessed to pretended sins and led the other to understand that they were indeed birds of a feather. Mayne detailed deliberate crimes of commission—thefts and violences. He supposed that it must be a terrific thing to take a human life; but he also suggested that, in stress of circumstances and under certain conditions, he believed himself man enough to commit a capital crime. The other was not slow to assure him in return that he had risen to these heights; and he even furnished instances; but they were vague and lacked detail. From careful study Mayne had now learned pretty accurately to appraise Thorndike's narratives and separate the true stories from the false. The latter were usually very wanting in detail and

lacked the colour and graphic force of things actually felt and done. But a true story rewarded him on the occasion of his boating excursion, and it was the most vital and fateful narrative he had won from Thorndike since their earliest acquaintance, for it restored to life the "boss" of "The Three Knaves"—the man Thorndike had declared was slain at Coolgardie. It brought him back definitely into existence, and it also identified him beyond much question with Septimus Forrester—a fact little guessed by the man who now told Mayne the story of another crime.

They took a boat at Richmond and Mayne remarked that Thorndike was, as he declared, an experienced "oar."

"So I am," said the little man, "and so I ought to be, for, after the Coolgardie days, I was employed on the Hawkesbury River for three years. In a gentleman's family I worked. 'Tis funny how rogue knows rogue. Though I was along with Ralph Webster for all that time and knew by a sort of inside feeling he was my sort, yet not till a year after my engagement did I find it out. And he knew by that time pretty

well the man I was — else he wouldn't have asked me to do the thing he did."

"Ralph Webster? I never heard you name him before."

"A cool hand. Two thousand pound I got out of that man—for upsetting a boat."

"Let me take the oars, while you tell the yarn. 'Tis a pity, Tim, that we can't make a book of your sporting sins. I warrant it would be pretty reading and sell in thousands. The British public loves to read about crimes that it ain't got the pluck to commit."

The other laughed and they changed places. Then, while Mayne sculled leisurely past Peter-sham, Thorndike told his tale.

"Webster was a wool merchant, by accident, along of marrying a widow. A Mrs. Pike she was, and she had chief interest in a big Sydney firm; and when her husband died, Webster—a young and handsome man—came along and sized her up and made love to her and won her. Amy Pike was ten year older than him and had children already—a stout, invalidish, kind-hearted, soft woman she was—always ailing and nought to look at. But she got dead set on Webster and believed his lies and reckoned that

he loved her for herself alone and not her cash. She worshipped him anyway, and pretty well said her prayer to him in the first years of their married life. He kept it up very clever and was a good husband as men go; and he got her interest in the wool business transferred to him as trustee for the children. Very kind to them he was, you may be sure, and made a lot of 'em. They had a very fine place on the Hawkesbury estuary, and Webster went into Sydney to the business every day but Saturday, and o' Saturdays he followed his ruling passion, which was plant-growing. It always mazed me with wonder to think how such a keen blade—full of the joy of life and bored to death if he hadn't a bit of secret wickedness in hand—could be so keen about garden rubbish. But he was, and he told me that he always had been—even in his young days, afore he'd had the luck to run across and catch his wife. She liked the garden, too, because he did, and 'twas a very wonderful place they made and a sight of the country-side. Twenty-five acres large it was, stretching out by the creeks of the Hawkesbury and full of the most amazing trees and shrubs and such-like. Mrs. Webster was very proud of it and never grudged

money. In fact, she took good care never to cross her husband in anything. She lived a regular child's life along with him and hadn't the smallest idea of the man he was, or the life he led unknown to her. But 'twas his amusement to run a double show, and even the wool people at the business didn't know a quarter about him what I did. Born wicked that man—couldn't help it. Now, in my case, I'm wicked because in my youth I had to be, and the habit grew and became my natural way of life. But Webster hadn't no call to be anything of the sort. You might almost have said a man in his position couldn't go wrong if he tried. He'd got cash and a kind wife, who never interfered with him, and he was able to follow his hobby and make the most wonderful garden in Australia; and yet for all that he wanted salt to life and took very good care to have it. A proper rake-hell in secret, and restless, too, and always hungering after some new thing. Cruel as a tiger at heart. To be cruel was his idea of sporting.

"I worked at first more as servant to the lady than to him, for he seldom went on the river; but 'twas her great pleasure to be rowed about for hours with her children. She didn't do much

in the way of parties and she chanced to be a female without any relations to mention. But she was happy in her quiet country life and in the belief that her husband worshipped her and put her comfort and content and happiness before all other considerations on earth. Very clever he was in his dealings with her, and to her last day she had no more idea than the man in the moon that she had married a beast of prey hid in a gardener. To such a man, deceiving a simple soul like her was as easy as falling off a log or picking his teeth.

"They had lived together, amiably and happily, well into the third year after I came to them, and they'd been married in all five years or a bit more, when one of the lady's children caught some evil and died of it. Whether 'twas a boy or girl I can't remember now; but from that trouble began worse and I saw very quick that Webster began to tire of his life and sigh for a change all round. The thing was played out to the bottom and he wanted more novelties. He might have been a man of five and thirty then, and he might have been a bit more, but after his wife's child pegged out, there seemed to be a widening gap between husband and wife;

for the sorrow of the loss made her grow old very quick. 'Twas the favourite, and its death, acting on her weak health, pretty well settled her for a bit. She couldn't have been no more than forty-five or thereabouts; but she looked sixty.

"The river always seemed to comfort the woman more than anything and she spent more and more time on it when the weather was fair; but, after her trouble, her temper—as sweet as honey afore—got soured a trifle and she turned against me and wanted me away. I'd fallen into a bit of a bother with a family down the river; and she heard of it and made a dead set at me and asked Webster to dismiss me.

"That he wouldn't do, however, as he had a lot of use for me by that time. He calmed her down, so well as he could, and she sulked and showed her resentment by not going on the water for a week. But that was cutting off her nose to spite her face, as the saying is, and she'd soon had enough of it. She made it up, for she was a simple, kindly creature at heart and couldn't long bide in enmity with man or mouse. And then she went sailing again in our dinghey;

and then I had my queer talk with her lord and master."

At this point in his narrative Thorndike paused and lighted his pipe, which had gone out. Mayne knew very well that he was considering how much more to tell, and how to tell it. Therefore he encouraged him.

"Don't hesitate," he said. "You know me. I wish I'd done the things you have. Perhaps I shall some day."

The other laughed.

"I'm not afraid of you," he answered. " 'Twould take a better man than you to fright me. I've had some good masters in my time, and larned a lot from 'em. But the devil couldn't have taught me more than Webster did."

He lighted his pipe and continued.

"You'll guess what next. The man came to it very gradual — step by step. I saw his game: he wanted me to tumble to his idea before he put it into words; and presently I did so and met him half way. But there was a bit of fencing first, of course. He got very friendly to begin with — increased my wages a lot and made more use of me himself. He went up the



Hawkesbury creeks after rare plants once or twice; and I rowed him, and we spent whole days together with nobody else there. And then he began saying that his wife's life was a burden to her; and then he began hinting that his wife's life was a burden to him. 'Life is regular played out for that woman,' he said. 'Upon my word, I believe she'd thank anybody that had the pluck to put her out of it.' You see his game? Anyway I did and the third time he touched the subject I popped in my oar and spoke—thoughtful like. 'I know 'tis just as you say with the lady,' I told the man, 'for often, when I'm sailing or rowing her about on the river, she sighs, and trails her hand in the water and forgets everything, and looks as if she was just longing to be dead and in a happier land along with her blessed child.' He nodded his head at that and I went on. 'Sometimes I've thought that if I had a bit of an accident sailing and got capsized in one of them squalls that came down sudden off the hills, that 'twould be a merciful thing for the poor creature. But then I think to myself, 'if that was to happen, what price me?' 'You can swim, can't you?' he asks, thinking of the thing just

from the life and death point of view. 'Oh yes, I can swim all right,' says I; 'but how about it? Supposing I did swim and get ashore with my terrible news—a pretty poor look out for me I reckon. We have all got to think of No. 1. in this world'; I tells him, 'for if we don't, 'tis darned certain nobody else will; and I can't afford to go helping the poor, unhappy lady to Kingdom Come and then perhaps get helped there myself for my pains—afore I want to go." I said all that to him and left him to put it in his pipe and smoke it.

"'Twas a full fortnight later before he touched on the subject again, and in the meantime, talking generally, he said that his great wish was to travel a bit in Europe and see other gardens, better than his own, and meet with men who took an interest in such matters. But his wife wouldn't go—in fact she hadn't got the strength for such a big business and the doctors said 'twas out of the question. She wanted him to travel without her; but he wouldn't do that and made rather a virtue of denying himself the fun. Then he came back to the old subject with me and told me that the doctors was very hopeless about his lady and feared she'd only

go from bad to worse and very likely, in a year or two more, lose her mind altogether and go melancholy mad and sink to living death. "Tis a case for Providence if ever there was one," I said in my sly way; but he took my meaning very sharp you may be sure. 'Have no fear for yourself if any unfortunate thing were to happen,' he says, cool as a cucumber. 'You will always be in my service as long as you wish to be.' Then I felt the time had come for me to make my bargain."

Again Thorndike broke off, but Mayne displayed the liveliest interest and admiration.

"By Jove! you are a marvel!" he cried. "If you'd been born in a different rank of life, there's nothing you couldn't have done—nothing!"

"You're right there. If I'd been properly educated, there's not much as I couldn't have rose to, and not much I would have stuck at. But learning was always my trouble. We ignorant men have to play second fiddle in the world. The clever ones use us. It's been my lot to pull the chestnuts out of the fire. But I've done it pretty clever I reckon—haven't burnt

my paws over-much and managed to keep a few of the chestnuts in the bargain."

"Yes, I'll warrant you have; and you may do a thing or two yet."

"That depends. I've got some interesting secrets still—about live people I mean—not dead ones. But that's beside the question. As I tell you, the time had come to make a bargain—and I made it. 'Suppose', I said 'that by some cruel bad chance in a gust down Orange Creek we got capsized and I swam ashore with the terrible news, after trying in vain to save your lady—suppose such a thing was to fall out and my nerves were too shaken to go back to the river, do you reckon, in consideration for my efforts to save her, you would be equal to letting me have a couple of thousand pound to start a public house in Sydney?' He thought a bit and said that there was no doubt whatever as he'd do as much for me. 'There can't be no writing about it,' he said, 'because there are some things men don't put on paper, but I can promise that money. The only question appears to me to be whether you would trust me.' Well, I trust no man, and I told him so; but we got over that little difficulty by arranging

a rowing match between me and another waterman; and my master backed me and promised me two thousand pounds to win. He was very rich, or rather his wife was, and so it didn't seem too startling to the few that heard about it. Anyway I got his promise in writing, and it was said that Webster had heavy bets on me. The rest he left to me, knowing that he could do so. And then the terrible accident happened on a rough day just as I feared it might. 'Twas really the poor lady's own fault, too, as I explained after, for she'd got the main sheet and was steering, and I was forward when the wind came down Orange Creek, a buster, as it often will and I went to help her, and the sheet was fast, and 'twas all over with us before you could say 'Jack Robinson'. I dived for her and did all that mortal man could have done; but it weren't to be. She was took out of the wicked world. And glad to go—glad to go. They found her a fortnight later and there was a very fine funeral, while as for her husband, he nearly went mad—such was the frightful grief of the man. What a fortune he would have made on the stage! He didn't blame me of course—nobody could—but, some-

how, the sight of me always brought back that dreadful business to his mind and so I left his service. The boat race fell through after the tragedy, for he'd no heart for such things, but very generously he gave me the money he'd promised if I won it, and I left him with a splendid character into the bargain. Find out a man's secrets and you can always get a good character from him. You remember that. And then I left the Hawkesbury too, having no more nerve for the water no more. I set up a public in Sydney and did very well for a bit — as long as the money lasted, in fact."

"And what became of Mr. Webster?"

"He died about ten years after. And a good friend to me till the end of his life. These things, you know, happened thirty year ago."

For once it seemed not difficult to find the truth amid Thorndike's lies. Mayne knew that the main particulars of his tale were true, because invention was never the rascal's strong point, and there were details here that would not have occurred to him. And he knew also, with inherent conviction, that Mr. Webster of Sydney and the Hawkesbury river was one and the same man with Septimus Forrester of Han-

gar Knoll and with Drake Chalmers, who had poisoned "Bully Bottom."

That night, when the day was ended, Mayne weighed the value of what he had heard. He guessed that soon after the death of his wife, Webster had come to England, changed his name, pursued his hobby of horticulture and established his money-lending business in London. With him doubtless came Thorndike; but the big man, "Bully Bottom", had only reappeared and desired to rejoin his former friends at a recent date. It was easy to guess that he knew more concerning Forrester than Forrester desired him to know, and that, in the end, he had answered dearly for his knowledge. But Mayne could not win any shadow of confidence on this subject from the motor driver. Thorndike always declared that "Bully Bottom" destroyed himself at Coolgardie, and he repeated the assurance on more than one occasion. It was certain, however, that the little man knew of "Bully's" presence in London, for he had driven him and his master together in the car; but whether he was aware of the other's death the detective could not be sure. The exact relation between Webster, or Forrester, and

Thorndike was also uncertain, and Mayne, after careful analysis of the character of Thorndike, felt disposed to suspect that his master had not taken him into complete confidence. He went further and judged that, did the master of Hangar Knoll guess at Thorndike's revelations to an unknown stranger, the little man might quickly have had to pay the penalty with his life.

Mayne's next move, conducted a week later, was to give Thorndike some account of the disappearance of Tom Preston from Ealing and the mystery connected with the event. He alleged that the facts had come to him through an Ealing friend and asked Thorndike, as one skilled in crime, what he made of the mystery. But the other declared that he had read all particulars in the newspapers at the time. He showed interest and asserted that only a rascal of the first class was responsible for the murder, but he could advance no theory of the crime and did not indicate by any word or opinion that he knew anything of the matter, or those who had figured in it.

Mayne did not press him then; but he felt that the time was at hand when the process of squeezing the truth from Thorndike might



have to begin. For the present, however, he continued in friendly relations with him, well knowing that when once his business was revealed, it would be necessary to take care that Thorndike never again communicated with Septimus Forrester.

Meanwhile that happened which drove "The Knave of Spades" out of mind for a season, and when he next met with him, it was under strange and unexpected circumstances, at a later act in the drama.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE BRACELET.

Three days later on seeking the driver of Septimus Forrester's motor car, Mayne received startling news. He had thought long upon the nature of his next action and was determined to separate Thorndike, if necessary by force, from his master. The danger and difficulty of such a course was not hidden from him, but to an impartial student of his problem, it might have been guessed that he had under-rated them. What would have happened under these circumstances it is impossible to say; neither need we concern ourselves with Mayne's elaborate preparations for the detention of Thorndike. They were not destined to be employed, because the motor car did not arrive at Link Court as usual, and for the first time in the detective's experience, the firm of Blamey and Chadgrove failed to appear at the accustomed hour on the accustomed day.

He learnt presently from a messenger in the office that the car had arrived very early with a message conveyed by the driver. It appeared that the principal was seriously unwell and must not be expected for ten days or a fortnight. Mayne first suspected that this physical accident, from which no flesh was immune, would seriously discompose Forrester; but his second theory was that the illness must be a blind, under cover of which the master of Hangar Knoll pursued private affairs.

Abandoning the idea of seeking Thorndike at home, he decided to see Forrester if possible, and later in the day returned to Ealing to do so. But he was informed that the sick man could see nobody and lay in the doctor's hands. Tucker gave him this news, and when Mayne sought for particulars, he found that the other knew but little, though he was quite prepared to tell all he could.

"I rather thought as Mr. Forrester would have seen you," said the man servant. "But he isn't going to. He can't see nobody — so he says. He's very ill, I believe, though he hides it all he knows how, and the doctor's coming again later on,"

"What's the trouble?"

"I can't tell you that. It come on very sudden yesterday evening—just as he was getting home—a burst blood vessel or some such thing I should reckon."

"Did he come back ill or was he taken ill on returning?"

"Come back ill from somewheres—just got in the house and crawled to his room, and left blood behind him in drops up the stairs, and rang for me. Wouldn't let me touch him, but told me to send for Doctor Thwaites that instant. And Thwaites came and looked at him; but the doctor was very short about it when he left master and, though 'twas natural we all wanted to know what had happened, he only gave directions for looking after Mr. Forrester and told us nothing else."

Tucker had said this much when a bell rang and there came a message from the sick man to send after Mayne, catch him and bring him back, as he had changed his mind and would see him.

"You had best to wait two minutes," advised the cautious Tucker, "else he'll know that you was down here gossiping, and I shall have

a flea in my ear. You ought to be half-way to the lodge by now, so you'll do well to bide a little while before you go to him."

Five minutes later Norris Mayne stood before Forrester and found the man with his left arm in a sling and his hand concealed by bandages.

"Sorry to trouble you," he began, "and indeed I had not intended to do so; but I am short of any confidential servant here as it is my custom never to make a confidant—least of all in that class. They have no sense of honour and, consequently, cannot be trusted in the real sense of the word. Who can? I am, too, without a secretary and only wish during my illness that I could tempt you to the task, but that of course is impossible. I have sent for a young man I know, in the offices of the Royal Horticultural Society, who will help me to the best of his power until I am about again. He is a fool, but an obedient fool—the only useful species. Luckily it is my left arm—not my right—that has been injured."

"Command me if I can serve you in any way. Did you meet with an accident?"

"I did. I fell heavily and put out both my

elbow and wrist. It will be a considerable time—ten days or possibly more—before I can use my arm again. Dr. Thwaites has set it and is looking after me. A great bore, for I am unusually busy just now. However, these trifles teach us how well the world can get on without our company.”

The description of dislocated joints did not tally with that of Tucker, and Mayne guessed that the injured man was unaware he had left sanguine traces of his accident behind him on his way to his room. But the detective expressed sincere commiseration and prepared to depart.

“You are sure that I can serve you in no way?” he asked.

“In none, I thank you—though you have doubtless done your poor best. I refer to your enquiry concerning poor Miss Grey, and I feel now that it has been pursued long enough. I am sure you are of the same opinion. It was on that account I sent after you just now. You have done what you could and the mystery seems impenetrable—both to you and the officials of Scotland Yard. From them I expected nothing; from you I had hoped for success. So much is hidden from the wise and prudent, is it

not? However, I am now satisfied that the poor young creature must be dead. Only so can I explain her silence. It is another mystery added to those which will be explained at the Day of Judgment. What an interesting day that will be for some of us! I have a list of these mysteries — historical and otherwise — that I want to hear cleared up. Doubtless many of the explanations will be absurdly simple. But you detectives look so far ahead in your wonderful subtlety and skill that sometimes you miss the truth because it is so near your noses. To return to poor Annabel Grey. It is strange that both she and the young man — her lover — should have figured in one of these cryptic events that happen, from time to time, to make us laugh at the helplessness of man. No doubt they are laughing at you and me from a snug corner of the Elysian fields. Let me have your account in due course. I am well satisfied that you have exercised all the care possible and taken all the trouble possible to your intelligence."

"I was going to ask you to let me abandon the case. I had indeed called for that purpose. I deeply regret the event—not less than yourself, Mr. Forrester—for I knew Preston and

had a personal interest in the young and beautiful woman he was going to marry. But I can do no more. Time may solve the disappearance. At present I confess that I have failed utterly to do so."

"What could be more frank and ingenuous?" asked the other, smiling.

They parted and Mayne leapt to a ready conclusion. He believed that on the previous evening the horticulturist had been in imminent peril of his life. He judged that he had been fired at and hit, but not vitally. During the interview the injured man had spoken with his usual calm tones and measured self-control and cynicism; but he was unable to hide the fact that he suffered great physical pain, nor could his facial disguise altogether conceal it. That his mind also was far from being at rest the visitor felt convinced.

Here, then, appeared another enemy for Forrester. "Bully Bottom," his blustering and villainies ended, slept in peace under Mr. Forrester's unique collection of hardy nymphaeas; but he had left a legacy of hate, it seemed, and if Mayne was right, there haunted Ealing still a man, or woman, who desired and intended the



destruction of Forrester. He built up the scene in his imagination and pictured another attack under the woods of Hangar Knoll. Again he saw Forrester—this time the real man and not the disguised Tom Preston—enter after dark by his wicket gate. Again he pictured him advancing by the woodland path. Then from the shadows there stole a fellow creature to take his life. But agitation or accident prevented the completion of that purpose. He fired and wounded his enemy only, then fled, perhaps under the impression that he had missed him altogether. Or it was possible that Forrester, who knew of his secret foes, had been himself armed and had retaliated. There might have been a battle from which, though wounded, he none the less emerged victorious.

This line of argument determined Mayne to repeat an old experience and search again through the woods, where Forrester's private door opened from the highway into the domains of Hangar Knoll. He lost no time in this enquiry and upon the same night, between one and two o'clock, entered the woods and began his search. Climbing from the railway and passing through certain fields, he walked for some dis-

tance round the lake, peered into the temple of white marble, where "Bully Bottom" had perished, and presently found himself amid the familiar regions of the wood. He believed that the attempt on Forrester's life had been made by that unknown person who had been with "Bully" when Preston was slain; and he guessed that exactly the same point of attack had possibly been chosen. There first, he sought for any signs; and he was immediately rewarded, for, where Tom Preston's corpse had been discovered, appeared traces of blood on the ivy by the path and on the path itself. Drops that had dried and turned black were spattered there, but no other evidence of any uncommon event marked the immediate scene. Here Forrester had been fired upon and hit.

He turned now whence the shot might be supposed to have come from, and, under the bright radius of the light thrown by an electric torch, spent two hours in a circular investigation extending over the probable standpoint of the shooter. And then he found it, and with it the confirmation of his own idea, that Forrester had not been unprepared for the attack and, indeed, was fully armed to repel it. Beside a pine tree,

gluing the fallen pine needles together in little heaps was more blood. There were indications also of a fall, for freshly broken twigs and the bruised sprouts of growing things showed where an object of some weight had dropped upon them. Spring was afoot under the woods and a clump of primroses stared up wanly in the electric ray with blood spattered over their petals. Upon the trunk of the pine also was a mark, for a bullet had scored the bark deeply, ploughed a ridge through it and passed on. It was clear that Forrester had fired more than one shot, though whether he himself had been hit more than once, Mayne could not tell. At any rate it seemed that the master of Hangar Knoll shot straight enough to drop his enemy. He then had probably hastened home, knowing himself wounded and being in doubt as to the extent of his injuries.

It occurred to Mayne to visit the old haunt in the drain near the gate from which had climbed the two men responsible for Preston's death. He guessed that it might have been used again on this occasion, and since the first chill gleam of dawn was now breaking, he made haste to examine the spot before departing un-

seen. There were clear indications that the place had been occupied; but there was no evidence of a hasty exit. Dead leaves had been disturbed and the tender growths of budding weeds were broken down; but not until the moment of his departure did the detective find any evidence to implicate an unknown visitor. Then it was only by an accident that an object very unexpected came to light. He felt something hard beneath his foot, bent, lifted it and discovered a woman's bracelet. The ornament was made of plain gold and had a little star of turquoise as its sole decoration. Engraven upon the inner side of the curve were certain letters: "T. P. to A. G." The trinket was a present from Tom Preston to Annabel Grey, and Mayne well knew that she had worn it ever since his death. The bracelet was bright and clean. It bore but one injury where the nail on his own boot had scratched it.

The man's quick mind rushed to an awful possibility of what this might mean, and his heart stood still. He saw some concatenation of events that had placed Forrester's secrets in Annabel's possession and sent her flying from him. He pictured the girl's passion at the know-

ledge that her employer had murdered her lover; he imagined her taking the law into her own hand upon the discovery and seeking to slay Forrester as he had slain his secretary. Then he thought of her as wounded — perhaps dying near him — perhaps already dead. The mental agony of these moments was insupportable and only by a mighty effort of self-control did he prevent himself from giving vent to his frenzy and shouting the loved name aloud.

For a while he stood dumb under the shock, with perspiration dropping from his face. One hand held the bracelet; the other flung a shaking gleam from his electric torch upon it. Then, conscious that the thin white illumination of dawn had stolen through the trees and that day would break, he renewed his search, if possible to find any further sign or token of Annabel Grey.

His mind grew clearer, but he found nothing. The old marks of hands on the bank were gone and the young green of dogs' mercury sprang up where a dead man had stamped the impression of his mutilated fingers. Mayne prepared to leave, conscious that for the moment he

could gain nothing by remaining there. He argued quickly that if Annabel was indeed responsible for Forrester's wounds, her unknown companion seen at Bath had probably accompanied her. That singlehanded she would have attempted such a deed seems unlikely; and there remained the mystery as to why she had entered upon any such undertaking without telling Mayne the reason. Well she knew that her cause was his in this matter, and that he had entered upon its tortuous ways for her sake alone. The attitude of mind that would have led Annabel upon so perilous a path was also quite foreign to her, and he puzzled in vain to conceive of any circumstances that would have driven her to such a dreadful deed. She was above all things sane, patient and self-controlled. That she should have accompanied another on such a task, or striven to incite another to it, were events equally improbable. But the bracelet gave the lie to plausibility, for it was a fact and its identity beyond question.

He guessed at the possibility of collusion between Thorndike and Annabel, but soon set that aside as unthinkable; for while it was a barely permissible theory that Thorndike —

perhaps aware of "Bully Bottom's" destruction — had himself endeavored to kill Forrester, by no chain of reasoning could Mayne link such an action with Annabel Grey. Again and again was he confronted with the insuperable problem of her separation from him in this matter. That she was still actively pursuing the mystery of her lover's death he now believed; for the bracelet, however it came into Hangar Knoll woods, associated her with them and with the attempt on Forrester's life; but he could still imagine no circumstances capable of tearing her away from him in such a pass and leading her, not only to associate herself with another in the great task of tracing her lover's murderer, but also of occasioning that last definite, written command. For had she not told him to seek no further and attempt no more? Had she not commanded him to cease entirely from the mission with which she herself had charged him?

Weary and troubled, he returned to his home in the dawn and, at the earliest possible hour, called upon Mrs. Fane to learn whether she had heard anything of her niece. But she knew nothing and declared that in her opinion nothing would now ever be known. She marked his

haggard looks, feared that he was working too hard and begged him, for her dead friend, his mother's sake, to take better care of himself.

"I know what Annabel was to you," she said; "and I know what you had become to her. You were more — far more to her latterly than you knew or guessed. She cared for you dearly, Norris, for she had grown to understand your patience, your goodness and your courage and determination. And that is why, too well, I know that she is dead. In any difficulty or trouble, yours was always the name upon her lips, and had it been in her power when her fate overtook her, to summon you to her side, most certainly she would have done so."

His heart ached and he longed to tell the kindly woman that it was not as she imagined; but for the present he kept his own counsel and went his way.



## CHAPTER XIV.

### A SPIRIT WALKS.

Mayne had a theory of what he thought might have happened to the assailant of Septimus Forrester and he guessed that the wounded man or woman would possibly seek surgical aid as quickly as he or she could do so. If the would-be murderer was dead, then the fact must soon appear and one of the many men and boys who worked in Hangar Knoll gardens might be expected quickly to find the corpse; but if wounded in such a way as not to interfere with immediate activity, the sufferer had probably sought professional aid as soon as possible.

The field of search was wide and much depended on the local knowledge of the patient. The seeker inquired of certain physicians known to him, but could learn of no casualty. Next he tried at Acton, among professional men who dwelt near the railway, and then, the day being far spent, he took train from Acton to London, occupied some hours there and returned at even-

ing to Ealing. Other matters were upon his mind, and, dismissing the events of the previous day as far as possible to do so, he prepared to spend a large part of the night with the material of a different and more ordinary problem. But something impelled him to be up and doing. A strange force, as of magnetism, dragged him back to the distracting puzzle, on which his heart was centered. He could not away with it for an instant and soon relinquished the vain attempt to do so. His restlessness increased and he found himself presently back to Hangar Knoll. The theory — probable by day — that some of Forrester's many gardeners might discover any corpse lying in the lonely places of the underwood, presented difficulties and became untenable to his brain by night. Why should man or boy wander there? A thousand spots lay scattered through the outlying shrubberies of Hangar Knoll, where a dead man might lie long undiscovered. There was also another possibility. Suppose that Forrester, with his return shot, had actually slain his enemy and seen him fall to rise no more? Mayne guessed that even at heavy cost to himself he would have made effort to conceal the corpse.

The detective had hoped also that this apparent crisis in her affairs might have brought Isabel back to him. He believed that now, if not, supposing her to be still alive and a free agent, she should have sought his aid. But she had not done so.

There seemed a voice in the air, a cry in the evening night, a summons insistent, imperious from Hangar Knoll. He started at eleven o'clock armed, and his original purpose was to call at the house for the purpose of learning how Septimus Forrester fared, and then proceed into the woods. But he changed his mind on the way, dropped into the little "Dive" club, to kill an hour, and then designed to enter Hangar Knoll as before from the railway cutting that ran below the estate.

At the "Dive," the information he desired concerning Forrester was furnished to him without any effort on his part. Dr. Thwaites happened to be there playing Bridge with friends and when he rose from the card table, Mayne engaged him in conversation. They were acquainted, but not intimate, and the detective found that the professional reticence of which Tucker complained was extended to him also.

Thwaites repeated Forrester's fiction concerning a dislocated elbow and wrist, while the other, aware of the truth, had no difficulty in perceiving that the doctor was evading it. For a moment he felt disposed to take him into his confidence, but dismissed the idea as useless at this stage of affairs. Thwaites himself asked a question. He knew that Mayne had worked for Forrester since the disappearance of Miss Grey and now enquired whether any news of the missing girl had rewarded the detective's efforts. On learning that Mayne was unsuccessful, he scoffed at his trade and declared that, in his experience, no cases of the least difficulty were ever solved by professional detectives, outside the pages of story books.

"People can go about too quickly now-a-days," he said. "Science has played into the hands of the rascals. A man may cut a throat in Ealing to-night and be at the Land's End before morning. The motor is the gift of the devil to the knaves in general. But Hangar Knoll certainly seems a nest of mystery. Old Forrester himself is the biggest mystery of the lot. I've attended him for years and don't know much more about him than you do."

"Perhaps there is nothing to know," suggested Mayne simply.

The other winked.

"I pay ten shilling visits: that's all that interests me," he said.

An hour after midnight Norris was in the woods again and proposed to himself a further exploration. It occurred to him that it might be possible to trace some track from the pine tree. A wounded creature had fallen beside it and it had either risen again and striven to get away, or it had been dragged or carried away with a view to concealment. In that case, seeing that the creature himself was wounded he could not have gone far with a dead or insensible man. Mayne thought of the water, but that lay more than a quarter of a mile distant.

The night was clear and bright with a full moon, that turned the first glimmer of spring leaves into a veil of grey on the boughs. A high wind made wild music overhead and the noise thus created for a time concealed from Mayne the fact that he was not the only person moving under Hangar Knoll woods that night. Fortunately, however, his sight served him in time and he suddenly observed a man standing

motionless not fifty yards from him. He was in a clearing. He carried a light and his head was bent over something, which he appeared to be consulting. He was too far off to distinguish, but Mayne had no difficulty in recognising him by his stature. Nor did the appearance of this particular man much astonish him. It was Thorndike — doubtless about his master's business; but the watcher could not tell whether he had to perform a definite deed, or was upon some search the issue of which remained uncertain. He guessed that Forrester would send for Thorndike and doubted not that the little man was now upon some secret commission in connection with the assault of two nights earlier. He suspected furthermore that the woods were not familiar to Thorndike and that he carried with him a plan, or sketch, to assist his nocturnal movements. This he was doubtless now consulting, before proceeding about his task.

Mayne, guessing that the great pine tree might be his goal, sank to the ground and crept away from it. He reached a clump of rhododendrons presently and was able to conceal himself therein and keep the wood about him under

ervation. Thorndike made no effort to hide himself or preserve any silence. Indeed preparation in the latter respect was not necessary, for the wood resounded with noises and the half-dged branches of trees made great singing and sighing where they rocked to the spring tide. The stranger to these domains was at a halt for some time, but presently he struck the path and after further consultation of the map he carried, came to a stand at the spot where the forerunner had been wounded. Mayne saw him examine the ground; then he marked the pine tree — a conspicuous object thirty yards distant rising above the undergrowth. Hither he came and stood where Mayne had stood when first he saw him.

Thorndike's actions made it clear that he had come to seek a corpse, but finding none, he was at a fault and stood for some time in thought. Presently he sat down on a root of the pine, that extended some distance from the trunk. He then extinguished his lantern and lit his pipe. He was evidently considering the situation. For half an hour he smoked; then he knocked out his pipe, lighted his lantern again and began to pursue just such an exploration as Mayne him-

self had designed for that night. The other watched him critically and had no fault to find with his methods. They were calculated and thorough. Slowly he proceeded and evidently sought some track or indication of footmarks or blood extending from the pine tree. But apparently no such sight rewarded him. For an hour he pursued his search and then began to approach the other's hiding place. Mayne thereupon crept further off. But he had not much longer to wait and guessed that Thorndike would soon arrive at his own conclusions and abandon the hunt. It was clear that Forrester's enemy had received no wound of a character severe enough to stop him; but Forrester, at the time of the assault, had seen the assailant fall to his answering shot and doubtless supposed that he was dead. To seek the corpse Thorndike was come; and it now remained to him to carry back to Hangar Knoll the disquieting news that Forrester's foe was not silenced but had disappeared.

Mayne moved behind the back of the "Knave of Spades", whose prospecting for a dead man had thus ended in failure, and creeping further and further off he gradually got beyond sight

•



or sound of him. He knew, however, the road that Thorndike must presently follow to return to the house, and he concealed himself beside it, that he might, if he decided to do so, intercept the other on his homeward journey. He was strongly tempted to use force with the little man and separate him from his master; for he knew Thorndike to be a type of rascal very quick to yield allegiance to the greater power. In return for his ultimate liberty, Mayne guessed that he would not hesitate to sacrifice even Forrester, if no alternative were presented.

That Thorndike knew who had fired at Forrester was tolerably certain, and the temptation to satisfy his fears on that subject alone would probably have outweighed any other considerations with Norris Mayne that night. There was an element of fatalism in his character; he could explain in no rational manner the call to the woods that had drawn him hither; and now he heard the voice responsible for his present position speak to him again in no uncertain tones. It bade him declare himself to Thorndike and prevent the servant's return to his master.

Yet he fought with himself under the shout-

ing trees, for the inherent instincts that made him what he was would not be silenced wholly, even by these fierce mandates from without. He asked himself whether, by taking this definite course, he might not spoil all and defeat his own object. Detention of Thorndike must mean instant suspicion on the part of Forrester.

He had arrived at this point in his arguments and felt himself strangely passive, while reason and impulse thus debated the problem in his mind. It seemed that he listened to them as an interested on-looker who followed the course of an argument between two other persons.

Then, however, that happened to decide him speedily. He heard footsteps and, though the moonlight was now somewhat obscured by passing clouds, had no difficulty in observing the approach of Thorndike. He came near enough to be recognised and then, for the space of a few moments, stood still. Evidences of acute emotion marked him and it was clear that he had just passed through some moments of very acute terror. He was listening intently now for some expected sound; but he could hear nothing. He stared to the right and left, as though drawn to the scrutiny against his will;

meantime he shook in every limb, mopped face and breathed loudly and heavily.

'My God! What a shavel!' he murmured loud enough for Mayne to overhear him.

Fear slowly lifted from the scoundrel's tures and thankfulness took its place.

uring the ten or twelve minutes since Mayne

lost observation of him, it was clear that

little man had passed through some tremendous experience and escaped a grave danger.

he hurried on now, glancing behind him from

ne to time until out of sight; and the watcher

ffered him to go, for he guessed that what

ight spell terror and trouble to this man,

ould be likely to serve him otherwise. No

rpse had inspired Thorndike with fear or

ade his knees knock together. It was a living

ing, and one that would perhaps have made

ort work of Forrester's creature, had he dis-

covered him. Doubtless a man was not far off

nd much of the truth might lie in his keeping.

But the detective went now to the strangest

xperience of his life and to a sudden, if tem-

orary, widening of knowledge and under-

standing for which he was but little prepared.

n his mind that night were only the dead and

living; his opinions and beliefs were materialistic and he neither believed in nor permitted himself to be influenced by the theory of any other conditions in the universe. Beings from another world or state, until this night he had refused to credit; even the mysteries of telepathy he flouted; but the husk of scepticism was destined to be stripped off his intellect, and his bodily eyes were confronted with the spectral vision of one known by all men to lie in the grave. Neither dead nor quick confronted Mayne as he proceeded in the direction whence Thorndike had come. Indeed, for some time he saw nothing and began to fear that he was too late; but the way took him presently to an open space beside the lily lake and here, at the elbow of two paths—one from the wood and one that wound to the little temple of white marble beside the water—Mayne stood still, then crept aside and hid in the shadows by the way, for a figure approached.

A shape went swiftly and silently by him. It passed towards the lake, where miniature waves driven by a fierce wind lapped and chattered along the margins. The form was clad in grey,

that looked white in the moonlight, but only white until Mayne marked the appalling pallor of the face. It was the figure of a tall man and swept past hurriedly as though impalpable, imponderable, a thing of fog and moonlight, an exhalation blown by the wind from advancing dawn into departing night.

Tom Preston's spirit, as it seemed, floated past the watcher, for while the habit was strange to Mayne, the face, despite its ghastly colour, left him in no doubt. Preston indeed it represented, but Preston in no state of peace, Preston in no condition of indifference to mundane things. He moved under the glimpses of the moon not far from the spot where he had met his death; and his brow was stamped with suffering, his eyes blazed agony, his cheek was withered and scored with torment untold. The transit of the phantom was swift, but it effected a very deep psychological upheaval in the mind of the man who saw it. For a moment after it had passed, he turned, with purpose to follow and mark the hasty and miserable shadow's progress; but it had already disappeared before Mayne was able to do so. The wind shouted noisily and the trees bowed their

heads and uttered wild harmonies from the myriad harps of their branches. The moon still shone and laboured among dark masses of heaving cloud, like a golden boat in a stormy sea. Beneath, all was wrapped in ebony and silver, with fleeting tremor of mingled light and darkness, where the shadow-throwing trees bent and quivered before the rushing wind. The region of this restless and moonlit wood seemed a fit stage for an unhappy apparition. It had revealed itself fully and distinctly and it had then departed; but Mayne believed the spectre to be quite unconscious of his own presence. It had not come to seek him; it did not haunt the theatre of its own tragedy to throw light upon that tragedy for the benefit of the living. It was about its own ghostly business — seeking something and finding it not. He perceived that by the accident of an occult power, or a temporary mental condition, induced perchance by his own overwhelming labours and anxieties during recent weeks, he had become *en rapport* with this forlorn being from the unknown; and he was shaken to the depths of his nature and disabused for the time being of many convictions respecting the improbability of a future

e. In vain he endeavoured to set the  
tre down as a mind image projected from  
own brain. He could not. Its unfamiliar  
nents alone denied the possibility. He  
ted long, in fearful expectation of seeing the  
oe of the murdered man again; but it came  
more and Mayne prepared to go his way.  
t was some hours before his mind recovered  
n sufficient to measure the significance of  
that had happened that night; but anon he  
able to do so, and analysis followed by  
thesis added a little, though only a little, to  
elucidation of his problems. One exceed-  
ly interesting fact sprang out from the welter,  
it concerned Thorndike. This man, it was  
dent, had seen the vision of Tom Preston  
ore Mayne confronted it; and the spirit had  
pired him not with such awe as overtook  
mind of Norris, but an active and present  
cor. He exhibited none of that indefinite  
l spiritual dread that might be supposed to  
ken in an uncultured mind thrust suddenly  
o the presence of an apparition. Thorndike,  
the contrary, showed mere panic terror —  
emotion of a coward abruptly faced by  
reme personal peril, or challenged with the

threat of death. Mayne recollected the words uttered by him. They surely indicated actual physical danger of the most vital character and were an exclamation of hearty thanksgiving that he had escaped from it.

"My God! What a shave!" he had said — in tones that proved beyond doubt he had been within a hairsbreadth of some mighty peril, if not of actual destruction. Such an attitude in Thorndike indicated one of two things; and Mayne was first called to decide between them. Either the car-driver had seen nothing at all of the spectre, and his peril and terror arose from some different cause, or he had seen the vision but failed to regard it as such. Norris ignored the first possibility and assumed that Thorndike had believed the spirit to be his enemy, and that he had avoided or escaped from it, under the impression that if it saw him, his death must probably follow. This meant that Thorndike was ignorant of the death of Preston. Thorndike then, did not know that Preston was long since dead and buried, and that, consequently, he had seen a spirit.

The inference was that Thorndike had not been associated with "Bully Bottom" or his



master in the murder of Preston; and yet the fact remained that he went in abject fear of Preston and now, under the impression that he had just avoided him, was returning thankfully to Hangar Knoll.

There he would relate to Forrester the failure of his search and the subsequent incident; and with the picture of that conversation Mayne perceived that his recent reasoning was based on a fallacy. He doubted for his own wits and laughed at the stupidity of the argument. For Thorndike *must* know that Preston was dead. The whole world knew it; and whether Thorndike was implicated or not in the crime of the murder, the fact of it could by no possibility be hidden from him. Mayne had himself discussed the mystery with him, to observe whether by hint or unheeded word he would commit himself in that connection and prove a personal familiarity with the details.

Thorndike, then, was well aware that Tom Preston must be dead; and yet the close, moonlit vision of the man's most unhappy spirit had awakened physical rather than mental fears in him. He did not come before Mayne as one who has seen and trembled at a being from

another world; but rather as one who had escaped by concealment or strategy from tangible, physical danger that threatened his existence.

"My God! What a shave!"

These are not words of a man who has seen a ghost. And yet Thorndike must have known that the figure was not real and could under no conceivable circumstances be real.

Then came the doubt that fell, as lightning falls on an unguarded tower, to shatter its masonry and wreck its symmetrical and harmonious proportions. There dawned a strange suspicion that struck Mayne's theory of Tom Preston's murder and rent its close-spun fabric from top to bottom. Not only that: this new suspicion, once pursued, tore web from woof, utterly destroyed the whole laborious structure that he had created and sent it, useless as a torn spider's web, down the wind and away to the limbo of all such impotent and vain imaginations. He had naturally begun his great task with one assumption: that Tom Preston was murdered. But how stood Mayne, and how Annabel Grey, if Preston were not murdered? How if that stricken shadow, wandering through the night, with grief's deep marks upon its face and un-

known suffering hidden behind its tortured eyes, was a living man and not the spectre of a dead one? Can the grave give up its dead?

The mind of Mayne whirled as he tried to reconstruct the whole past upon this assumption. But the effort made at that dawn hour, with his senses numbed and his nerves still throbbing from their recent terrible experience, was more than the man's wearied intellect could compass. He fell asleep and did not awake until his landlady entered the sitting room the next morning, found him slumbering in his easy chair and uttered an exclamation which broke his rest.

## CHAPTER XV.

"COME TO ME."

The rested brains that Mayne brought to their task anew on the following morning were soon concerned with the events that meant far more to him than those of the previous night. For there came a call louder than any summons from dead or living man. A woman cried to him — the one woman his world held. At last, in her extremity of need, as he suspected, Annabel Grey had remembered Norris and now prayed for his presence as swiftly as might be. Well she knew that he would not delay.

Half an hour after his landlady awakened him, there came a telegram for Mayne, and it scattered the darkness of his mind in one direction while it begat fresh and gathering gloom in another.

"Come to me. A. 3 Lupus Street. Bath."

The laconic summons was answered as swiftly as possible and Mayne caught a non-stopping train from Paddington an hour later. His mind

worked mechanically now and it was difficult to still thought, but purposely he endeavoured to do so, because he knew that ere long a large part of the mystery—the part most vital to him as affecting Annabel Grey, must be cleared up. That she was now a free agent — if she had not formerly been one, seemed clear; yet it might be that she had only despatched the telegram with great difficulty and risk and was still under constraint or in peril. Or it might be that the message was a trap that had not come from her. But he put the matter from him and rested his mind as much as he was able. An emotion of partial peace had relieved the tension of his thoughts and one immense weight was lifted from off them. For Annabel lived: of that he felt sure enough. That she had passed beyond his reach for ever he knew, only too well, for trust, not to name love, could never have acted as she had done. But she had lived and remembered him and sent for him at last, knowing that she would not send in vain.

Yet the hoped-for explanation was destined to be delayed. The girl lived, indeed, and at dawn of that day had sufficient self-control and presence of mind to send for her friend; yet

when he reached her side, she did not know him. There was no difficulty in gaining access to her. She dwelt in a mean street near Avon, and was lodging there, in two rooms. The landlady of the house explained her theory of Annabel's sudden illness and believed that a man, of whom she had recently seen a good deal, was engaged to marry her and had changed his mind.

"At any rate, that's how I read it," said Miss Burke. "Though a spinster myself, I had four sisters, and every one of them was married, after adventures, and the doubts and difficulties of the courting state are very familiar to me. A young man has been very attentive to Miss Grey of late. Nothing wrong, of course, but I'm afraid he lifted her hopes too high. Anyway, she hasn't heard anything from him in a month o' Sundays now, and it's got on her nerves and worked the very mischief with her. 'As good fish in the sea as ever came out of it,' I've told her; but them old sayings are very cold comfort to the ear of a jilted lover. 'Tis a jilting I'm afraid. He's got tired of her — more shame to him for a prettier, nicer young woman never was wooed and won. Though her beauty is to seek for the present, because she's got brain

'fever and had all her hair cut off. And I hope as you can tell me that there'll be money to pay for it all. And the doctor is coming again this afternoon. No danger for the minute. But brain fever is brain fever and a very serious sort of business, of course."

She ran on and Mayne could learn very little further from her; but the doctor when he came was more explicit. Annabel Grey suffered from a great nerve storm, which had affected the brain. Until that morning there had been no fear of such a grave condition; but after dispatching her telegram, she had grown worse and lay for the present unconscious. She was, however, very busy moving through fever dreams and among people and events where Mayne could not follow her.

He saw her, mourned for her beautiful hair and sat some while beside her; but with night came a professional nurse and he departed. For three days the lover was called to possess his soul in patience; then Annabel had passed out of danger and returned to consciousness. Her first care was for him and their meeting did not lack affecting incidents. It seemed that she had never been so near him before, or that

such an understanding had existed between them. It was some days before they were permitted to talk together, but at length the doctor allowed Annabel to tell her story. He limited any serious mental efforts, however, and since she had much to tell, the listener was constrained to have her narrative in small pieces, bit by bit and day by day. But he anticipated much of it and, from his own knowledge of contemporary events, was often able to run on mentally beyond the point reached by the storyteller. He helped her with the strange tale that she told him, and sometimes soothed her mind not a little by throwing light or a gleam of hope where all was dark and terrible. Incidentally her story crushed Mayne's own dreams and aspirations for ever. It contained terrific news, confirmed his suspicions, and shattered his hopes beyond apparent power of any restoration. For others, life might contain a little promise still; for others, some faint weather-gleam appeared to break wild and fitfully through the storms and tempests of their days; for him the sun had set on endless night, and the barque that held his sole treasure was foundered in a sea of stern destiny. For him



only there remained to labour on behalf of others; and he faced the need. His difficulties were far from ended and, with all the will, it appeared doubtful whether any living being now possessed the power to order Annabel's life as she desired to have it.

She, too, was changed and her own desires for the future remained uncertain. Indeed she shrank from thought of the future. She had passed through mighty and unique trials, and her furnace of suffering, terminating as it had in an illness that threatened her life, left her a broken-hearted, helpless woman, indifferent to existence and little thankful for the boon of it. To have died had been no great hardship then; for the life into which she now returned was more difficult than death and more terrible to face. Much she was able to tell Mayne, but not all. Concerning the facts she presented a very clear statement, but the ultimate significance to herself of what had happened she could not tell; while as to the course of affairs as it affected her heart, upon that subject she was profoundly silent.

The invalid first made clear her own extraordinary actions and showed how a will

stronger than her own was responsible for them.

"Four weeks ago, though it seems more like four hundred years," she said, "I came to Bath on business for the man who calls himself Septimus Forrester. The director of his gardens was ill and he desired to avoid delay. I had been showing and feeling some interest in his plants, and, indeed, threw myself into horticulture energetically as a means of escape from my own thoughts. He regarded me as a promising pupil, therefore, and I was well content to undertake this work, convey valuable young plants to the famous Bath Botanical Gardens and bring back other treasures to Hangar Knoll. I delivered the plants and selected others; then, while the parcel was being packed that I had to carry with me, I went for a walk in the Botanical Garden. As I was examining the alpines in a rockwork and bending to read their labels, a man passed me and started so obviously that I looked up. He hurried on and I forgot him; but presently I saw him again approaching. He was tall and square-built. Indeed his figure reminded me very vividly of another. The man wore shabby clothes and appeared to belong to the class of artisans. He

wore a light, close beard and large moustache. I perceived that he was returning and found him a moment later at my side. He stopped and I felt horribly nervous; but when he spoke, my senses swam and it was only for a few moments that I remained in possession of them. For the man had Tom Preston's voice and uttered one word in the fierce, fond accents I knew so well.

"He addressed me by name, and I started, stared, saw my lover's eyes gleaming out of that strange, haggard, hairy face, and fainted away.

"When I recovered consciousness, a little crowd had collected, but they disappeared a few moments later. Then the man gave me his arm and took me to a seat in a nook sequestered from the principal attractions of the gardens.

"Norris, it was Preston! He lives — at least, I cannot speak now with any certainty as to that — but he came before me then as a living, suffering and tormented man — a man hiding from wrath and burning with wrath — an unhappy wretch pursued by worse evils than any his fellow-men are able to inflict upon him. His awful experiences he withheld from me then; but he was at pain to dispel my doubts and made it clear to me, beyond all question,

that here indeed was the man whose funeral I had attended and at whose grave I had so often knelt in prayer.

“I cannot tell you what my own feelings were. I only know that love seemed a thing that must for ever be dead and buried between us; but immeasurable pity for his sufferings sprang up in my mind. The horror that haunted him looked out of his eyes and froze me. I desired to help him; I asked if it was in human power to do so and I named your name. For a time he raved incoherently and I could only understand that he held our meeting as the deliberate plan of Providence. He had much to say, but could not say it then. I told him I was carrying on his own work at Hangar Knoll, as well as I could, and he forbade me to do so any longer. He cursed Forrester with horrible imprecations and said that the man was viler than all the devils in hell. He commanded me to leave him instantly. He told me that unutterable sorrows had fallen to him, that he had fought to keep them to himself, but that a merciful fate had sent me back into his life and that my place was henceforth by his side until the end. How could I hesitate? The strongest ties had bound

us together and this was not the time for a woman who had loved him to absent herself from the unhappy creature. I believed him and I obeyed him. His fierce entreaties made me powerless and dumb. Yes, I obeyed him in everything; but that was before I knew everything.

"He saw me to the station presently, when I returned with the plants, and he then directed my future actions. I was to cut myself off absolutely and utterly from all who knew me, even as he had done. None was to learn any particulars of my hiding-place. He commanded me to desert both my home and my work without any previous hint of my intentions, and to come straight to him, where he lay in close concealment at Bath. I argued for time to consider such a step, but he would not hear me; he overwhelmed me with his force; he explained how that, when I knew all, I should agree without question that he was doing right. Even then I was frightened at him, for I could not fail to see how that the past had left a very definite and terrible impression upon him. He was altered and aged. He refused to speak one word concerning his story until I returned to

him; and he showed a curious indifference to all I might have told him. The past did not appear to interest him as much as the future. He explained that the work of his life was not yet accomplished and spoke of a deed that still awaited his hand and his only.

“He wrote to me at great length the next day, disguising his writing, which of course was well known at Hangar Knoll. He reiterated his commands; and now he did dwell upon the past — our brief, happy past as devoted lovers. I hesitated long, but at last felt that my fate, whatever it might be, was linked mysteriously with his. I believed also that it would be well to obey him in every particular and trust him to explain to me such an irresponsible course and with bitter suffering to myself, I did as he bade me. But I pleaded and indeed insisted when we met for the right to acquaint you with the fact that I lived and was well. He objected but I declared that I would leave him if he refused. He saw the letter and directed me to add the order that you should take no further steps in your inquiry. He resented the inquiry itself with frenzied unreason. By that time I had told him all that was known; and most earnestly I

implored him to let you learn the secret of his life and its terrible problems. But he refused absolutely and presently forbade me to mention your name again. He blamed your action in the matter, and doubly when I told him that you were only doing it at my desire. He exercised an unbounded control over me and I obeyed him without question, though only too conscious of the futility of the situation and the folly of his plans. But though his mysterious power upon me persisted, I could not fail to mark the deterioration of his mind. This was consequent on one terrible discovery and the incidents that followed it. I believed that he loved me less fiercely than of old; indeed I was no longer the first thought in his mind. A passion far stronger than love possessed him. It was literally a case of possession. I seemed to be living the old, dreadful days at Ealing over again; but with this difference, Norris. Then it broke my heart to be second in his thoughts; now I was glad to be. My inner attitude had changed and my pity ceased to be akin to love. Indeed I feared him terribly.

"But I must first tell you his extraordinary story, for, without knowing it, you cannot judge

him fairly or understand the tragic reason for his alienation of mind. And as for you, Norris, I can only humbly ask you to forgive me for all the grief I know I have caused you. It must be hard for you to forgive; but perhaps not so hard, when you have heard all."

This much, in disconnected sentences and with rest between them, Annabel told Mayne in the course of two interviews, each extending over an hour; but she did not begin the narrative of Tom Preston until two more days had elapsed and she felt strong enough to unravel some of its tortuous threads.

Meantime the man who had found her, lived for her and dreamed of her when he was absent from her. He marked each day do its work, saw the colour deepen in her cheek, the light brighten in her eye, the tone of her voice grow more steady, more musical. The halcyon days plunged him deeper than ever into the sea of his mighty passion. For her he lived and for her, if need be, he was prepared to die.



## CHAPTER XVI.

### ANNABEL'S STORY.

Annabel's statement was methodical and explicit. All, or anything approaching all, she did not know, nor could Mayne fill more than a few of the gaps in her narrative; but much that she told him now tended to increase his knowledge and narrow the radius of inquiry. Incidentally she confirmed his theory of "The Three Knaves" and how two of the three had not died at Coolgardie, but lived, and came together again in process of time. Unconsciously it happened that her chief service in this narration was to supply the omissions and correct the falsehoods in many of Thorndike's statements.

She related first how on the very night that Preston was about to announce his engagement a stranger had visited Hangar Knoll, and how Mr. Forrester had seen him and repudiated his claims. She then continued.

"This man whose name appears to have been 'Bully Bottom', since nobody knew him by any

other, was one of a company of three, who many, many years ago established a sort of reign of terror in the mining camp of Coolgardie. Their names were Drake Chalmers, 'Bully Bottom' and Timothy Thorndike. They prospered for a time, but at last, the second was detected cheating at cards and punished in a hideous manner by having two of his fingers struck off. This assault was the signal for a general melee from which the mutilated 'Bully Bottom' fled. The third of the gang, Timothy Thorndike also escaped, but the leader, Drake Chalmers, was left for dead. Long afterwards however he explained to his comrades that he had fallen unwounded and pretended to be a corpse. When search was made for the supposed dead body of this man, he had disappeared and vanished from Coolgardie for ever.

"Concerning the next few years of his life, Tom could learn nothing, but he appeared later in a position of prosperity at Sydney. His social grade and education were greatly superior to that of his friends. At any rate he reappears, under the name of Webster, as a respectable man and moving in decent society.

"He prospered and presently we find him paying court to a Sydney widow — one Mrs. Pike. She was rich and evidently fell an easy prey, for the man — so Preston learned — was of a striking and hawk like beauty in his younger days. Mrs. Webster, as she now became, had large interests in a firm of wool brokers, and these interests were transferred to her second husband, who undertook the trusteeship of her estate, on the behalf of the children of her first marriage. Of these children Tom has been able to learn the number, and this he also discovered: that he was one of them.

"After his marriage, Mr. Webster represented his wife's business interests and went frequently to Sydney from their home — a place of great magnificence on the Hawkesbury River, where the man developed his passion for horticulture and spent a great deal of his wife's money on the pursuit. She was older than he; and she appears to have cared much for him and been very happy in her country home, with her husband and children.

"And now his former friends reappeared, and, in the case of Thorndike, he employed the man and took him permanently into his service;

but when 'Bully Bottom' turned up at Sydney, he would do nothing for him. He associated 'Bottom' with the collapse at Coolgardie, refused to have anything more to do with him and bade him cross his path no more. Thus repulsed 'Bully Bottom' turned his attention to Thorndike, who was now employed as a boatman to Mr. Webster. His work chiefly consisted in sailing a little yacht, or rowing a dinghey, for Mrs. Webster; because while her husband cared nothing for boating and was seldom on the river, she took a great delight in this amusement and spent much of her time with her children on the Hawkesbury.

"She appears to have been a simple, kind-hearted creature, very happy and absolutely hoodwinked into the belief that her handsome husband adored her. Of him she knew nothing in reality and supposed that his horticultural tastes represented his only interest in life after affection and regard for her.

"Thorndike and 'Bully Bottom' kept in touch; but Webster was unaware that they were doing so. There came a time, however, when the sinister man found fresh and ugly work for his subordinate, and gradually made it very

clear to Thorndike that he desired his wife's death. The lady had lost one of her children and became morbid and melancholic. Moreover, it was clear at this stage in his career, that Webster was very weary of Australia and desired to return to England, whence he had originally come. He plotted now with Thorndike the destruction of his unfortunate wife, and Thorndike made no demur. But unknown to Mr. Webster, the boatman took another into his confidence and shared his reward in secret with 'Bully Bottom'. The actual murder, according to 'Bottom', was his work. But all that Webster knew recently was that the little yacht had been upset and his wife drowned, while Thorndike escaped by swimming and just made the shore at his last gasp. The deed Webster attributed entirely to Thorndike and that wretch received a reward of two thousand pounds for what he had done, though the money was paid to him ostensibly in connection with a boat race. But 'Bottom' told Tom Preston that Thorndike had come to him with the project, and, being too weak of purpose to carry out the crime single-handed, had offered him half the reward to help. His description of the

actual event was as follows. On a day when Mr. Webster was from home, Thorndike took Mrs. Webster upon the river as usual and, when coasting in a lonely creek, 'Bully Bottom' had hailed them from the bank and asked them to carry a lame man across the river. He was, of course, unknown to the lady, but she—the soul of good nature—made no demur and directed her boatman to serve him. 'Bully Bottom' came aboard and within ten minutes of his arrival, the little yacht was deliberately capsized and the murderers swam ashore.

"The situation can now be defined as follows: Two men had joined forces to carry out Webster's wish, while Webster himself remained under the impression that only one was responsible. He then pursued his intentions and, within eighteen months after the catastrophe, left Australia forever. With him he took Thorndike and his wife's children, who inherited her fortune; but, as their trustee, he converted their interests in the Sydney firm of wool brokers and so cut off all future connection with Australia.

" 'Bully Bottom's' narrative here of necessity becomes disjointed. It seems that, on leaving

Australia, Thorndike gave him the slip. He was unaware that his accomplice had arranged to depart with Webster; for 'Bottom' had designed to blackmail Webster through Thorndike. But the latter was cunning; he vanished; 'Bottom' thought him dead and did not guess that Thorndike had gone to England with Webster.

"Many years elapsed and this ruffian's adventures during that time have been detailed to Tom very fully; but they do not bear upon the case, and it is not until a few months ago that the man returns into the thread of these events. He declared that he never expected to trace or discover his old companions; indeed he did not come to England for that purpose, but in connection with the Australian Exhibition, to be celebrated this year at Earls Court. Then accident threw him into the company of Thorndike, now for many years established as Mr. Forrester's motor car driver in London. I say 'Mr. Forrester,' because Webster, as he had broken every bond with the past and changed his name on going to Sydney from Coolgardie, so now, upon his return to England, did the like and started a new life under the name of Sep-

timus Forrester. But it is a double life, as you know and while they call him thus at Ealing, there are many elsewhere, in London, who associate him only with the firm of Blamey and Chadgrove, money lenders of Link Court.

"The accident of meeting with Thorndike very soon modified 'Bully Bottom's' interests at home. He gleaned all that was to be gleaned from his old partner, but the secret of Forrester's dual personality, Thorndike did not divulge, and 'Bully' discovered it for himself. He learned also from Thorndike that Tom Preston was a son of the woman murdered in Orange Creek on the Hawkesbury River, and when in course of time he called upon Forrester with his story, and was repulsed and ignored, he considered the other's step-son and finally approached him with the truth concerning his mother and himself."

At this juncture Annabel broke off and manifested grief and trouble. Her listener was sympathetic and begged her to say no more at that time, to rest and to leave the next revelation until the next day; but she would not.

"It has to be told," she said, "and you, who know Preston and his peculiarly sensitive, pas-



sionate and headstrong nature, will be able to make some allowance for him at this stage of his life and before the awful information that now came into it.

"Consider what he heard: that Septimus Forrester was the murderer of his mother and the robber of his patrimony; that a man for whom he had always entertained dislike, had really merited his undying hatred. It was too much for Tom, and his loss of self-control at this discovery made him an easy prey to the two rogues from whom the information came. Both were alike unknown to him, for he had no idea of Forrester's double life until informed concerning it, and he did not know of the existence of Thorndike, though the latter in his early childhood had often conveyed him on the Hawkesbury with his mother and brother and sister. Expressing a wonder to Thorndike that he had not been destroyed with his parent, it was explained to him that the death of the children must have ruined Forrester's own project, for in that event, his wife's money reverted elsewhere.

"Concerning these matters 'Bully Bottom' knew nothing, but Thorndike was well informed. Preston's mother had three children, and one,

a girl, died in Australia before Mrs. Webster's death, while her two little boys came to England with their step-father."

Annabel ceased again, but quickly resumed.

"I have to tell you now, Norris, what is agony to tell, and — yet — I cannot find it in me to blame Tom when I think of his hideous provocation. Why he took such a course, he himself, in his calm moments, has not been able to understand. Looking back, the past has seemed to be one long hideous nightmare of passion and insanity; and, indeed, he was mad to put himself in the hands of such men, when so many different and wiser courses might have been followed. But he did terrible wrong, and great though the wrong has been, it is light when one considers the punishment. All is not over yet. He goes a doomed man and no mortal power can ever extricate him from his position."

She sighed deeply and the prospect of what she had now to tell unnerved her. Mayne knew largely to what he must listen; but certain points in the narrative promised to be of profound interest, as leading directly to the heart of the mystery. He was not sorry therefore to break off here.

mystery. He was not sorry therefore to break off here.

"I will hear no more now," he said. "I have enough to think of—more than enough. Moreover I must leave you to-day and return to Ealing. It will not be long; but we are anxious about him—Tom, and I should be very thankful if at these vital stages of life, he would come to me and trust me to do all in my power for him."

But Annabel shook her head.

"It is too late now. He has taken the law into his own hands, for only so will he ever win what his heart is set upon: revenge. He has lost sight of all else. For his own life he cares nothing. Its needs are reduced to one awful necessity. He will not die while Septimus Forrester lives."

"And you?" he asked.

"I am nothing to him any more. I soon found that out; and I was very thankful to do so, though not on account of his difficulties and the tragedy of his life. They would have drawn me closer to him; but because—oh, there are many reasons, Norris. The chief I suppose is this: that love is now an emotion he himself

has long lost sight of. There was left no room in his heart for any such thing after he heard what he heard. It was swallowed up and forgotten, and then he did what he did. . . . Me he wanted when by chance we met, and I have been a comfort to him I know; but my power is ended now, and to do him any good or save him from himself is beyond a woman's wits. With the greatest efforts; by dint of struggles that ended on this sick bed and threatened my own brain and own life, I postponed his action; but from the first I felt I should only postpone and never prevent it. His love, if not actually dead under this impulse, has now become far too weak a thing to chain the hate that raged in his heart. What may be his emotions after he has destroyed Septimus Forrester, none can tell; but for that purpose and that purpose alone, he now lives. He may indeed have accomplished it for all I know to the contrary. Yet I think you would tell me if such a thing had happened; and if you did not it is certain that he would."

## CHAPTER XVII.

### THE PLOT AGAINST FORRESTER.

Mayne soon found himself in a position to return to Bath. He discovered first, that Septimus Forrester was reported as convalescent and that he had resumed his regular visits to London. He satisfied himself that the master of Hargar Knoll was not suspicious, save in one direction, and he doubted not that the duel between him and Preston would soon be renewed. But what they were doing against each other and on which side Timothy Thorndike was working he could not be sure. For the moment he did not trouble concerning Thorndike, though through the car driver he felt that the denouement was destined to be reached. He returned now to Annabel Grey and listened presently while she continued her narrative.

She was growing stronger daily, but her mind continued in a condition of great depression and distress. She had hoped on Mayne's return to hear something definite concerning Preston, but

he was able to tell her nothing for the present.

"I repeat," she began, "that you must make every allowance for this unfortunate man and be charitable, even when you hear the course of action he now entered upon. For remember that he was always the slave of a morbid imagination, and a passionate, unruly nature. He learns that his mother was cruelly murdered at the instigation of this man; that his patrimony has been taken from him and that his brother, the only relation remaining to him in the world for all he knows, has been hidden from him for ever. Whether he is alive or dead his accomplices cannot tell him. He decides to destroy Septimus Forrester, and he would indeed have done so swiftly enough and openly, but for those dark forces with whom he had thrown in his lot. They, however, control his actions and indicate his line of conduct. The man, 'Bully Bottom', was Tom's evil genius, from the time that first he met him by appointment and listened to him. Preston is introduced to Thorndike, and Thorndike, from his intimate knowledge of the old life at Hawkesbury River, is able to tell Tom much concerning his mother and his earliest youth. These stories stirred his imagination —

always too active. He saw the past and his mother's days and his mother's death. It is interesting to me that he apparently separated 'Bottom' and Thorndike from Forrester in connection with the crime. They unblushingly owned to their villainy and but for Forrester's repulse of 'Bully Bottom,' Preston would never have heard of the murder at all; yet he felt from the first that they were only the filthy tools in another hand and did not apparently mind working with them. The actual murderers of his mother did not do more than incite his loathing and abhorrence — so he assured me. It was the real murderer — her husband and his stepfather — against whom Preston now set out to be revenged.

"Had he pursued his purpose single-handed, Forrester would have been dead long ago; but 'Bully Bottom' matured a different plan and Thorndike improved on it. That Preston was Forrester's heir there existed no doubt, for though Tom himself could not be sure of it, Forrester had informed Thorndike that such was the case. "He don't care a snap of the fingers for you," explained Thorndike to Tom. "He sets no more store by you than by any other crea-

ture on earth; but he's got to leave his money to somebody, and he's left it to you. But Hangar Knoll and the gardens he's left to the Royal Horticultural Society—and enough to keep 'em going and put his statue in the middle. You'll have about fifty thousand quid when he dies—your own money not his." Acting on this statement and under the influence of 'Bottom', Preston now prepared to assassinate Forrester secretly. He proposed to carry out the murder in such a way that it should remain for ever a mystery. It was of course agreed that both the wretches assisting him should be liberally paid for their work when Preston inherited his fortune.

"Various suggestions were made, for a man of Forrester's methodical habits was easy game; but none commended themselves to Preston. Then he himself decided to lie in wait for Forrester on his homeward way through the grounds and destroy him. What happened was this: Septimus Forrester went away on business connected with his hobby. At any rate he gave out that he had done so, and, indeed, for some time must have been in the north. He was absent for ten days from Hangar Knoll. He took



his car-driver with him, but communicated regularly with Preston during his absence from Ealing. Thorndike also communicated with Preston in secret and informed him of his master's movements.

"Then came the announcement of Forrester's return. He wrote to say that he should be in London on a certain date and that he should stop there one night, pursue his business on the following day and come back to Ealing in the evening as usual. Preston knew the exact significance of this statement. It meant that Forrester would arrive at Ealing Common station on the District Railway at half-past six o'clock on a certain evening; that he would walk from the station; enter the grounds by the private gate at the bottom of them, and make his way through the woods by a certain path to the house.

"This occasion was determined upon for the murder, as Thorndike corroborated his master's statements. 'Bottom' and Preston proceeded to lay their plot. It was simple enough. They hid in the woods after dark, where you discovered they had hidden. They waited there until the sound of the gate in the wall revealed to them that Forrester had arrived, and then

climbing quickly from their place of concealment, they cut him off and confronted him."

She ceased a moment, but Mayne knew what was in her mind.

"One little act and all would have been so different," he said. "Had the ruffian with poor Preston fired that shot; had the actual doer of the deed been another, then, seeing the circumstances, all might have been condoned and pardoned him. And even as it is, I pardon him, for surely no living man was ever faced with more hideous and appalling provocation. But you have to tell me that it was Preston that took a life."

She nodded.

"How well you understand. Yes, the agony of it lies there. Before man he stands branded as a murderer for ever. Murder is murder—a thing of little account in the old, fierce days when each was a law unto himself and the battle went to the strong; but now, under the force of Christian thought and Christian values, a horrible and unspeakable deed, be the incentives and temptations what they may. And horrible and unspeakable it was, for he had to do with a far subtler and wickedder personality than

that of the ruffian who was assisting him. He had plunged headlong into this crime little guessing the natures, either of those who were on his side or those who were against him. He sinned indeed and sinned terribly, but his punishment came with awful swiftness and heart of fiend could not have planned one more tragical and complete. You will guess what had happened, Norris, but I need not anticipate. I am only concerned with the statement of facts and must tell them in their order."

For a while she was silent and he walked up and down the room, mended the fire and waited her pleasure to continue.

"Preston fired three shots from a revolver at short range and the man before him dropped dead. You must understand that Tom was not at Hangar Knoll at the time, and he was not supposed to return until some days later. It had been arranged that, after the deed, he and 'Bottom' should part, and that Tom should go out of the grounds by the gate, of which he possessed a private key, while his accomplice left them by the railway cutting and returned to London by a train from Acton. But circumstances tended to modify Preston's plans, for the crime

was discovered almost immediately and while he waited hidden after 'Bottom's' departure, there came a policeman near him running to the house from the woods. He soon found that other constables were at the scene of the murder and he continued concealed for some time after the dead body had been conveyed to Hangar Knoll. At length, however, when all was quiet in the woods, he prepared to escape, and he was just about to let himself out by the private gate when he heard a key thrust into the lock on the other side of it. He stood hidden and the next moment there entered Septimus Forrester himself. He was returning to his home. There, within a yard of him, passed the man he imagined that he had murdered an hour before! Was that not enough to unhinge his mind?

"Preston believed himself in a dream and could not tell what had happened to him. For a considerable time he remained hidden, struck into stone by this extraordinary occurrence. I think indeed that it must have unsettled his intellect, for it is certain he is absolutely changed and often lacks the power of volition now. His brain, he told me, seemed to stop, like a clock run down, and it was a long time before he

could make it begin to work again. Then he perceived that he had not murdered Forrester; he grasped the fact gradually that Forrester lived, and that another man, who was personating Forrester, had been his victim. Some far-reaching treachery had been practised against him and he was the victim of a dark scheme of which he knew nothing. A counter-plot had been laid against his plot; he was hoist with his own petard and his hand had been used to sweep out the life of some being against whom he felt no hate — some unlucky fellow creature of whom he knew nothing. Who was on his side and who was against him? Did Forrester know what had happened and had he planned it, or were his fancied friends responsible? Again, was the second man who came through the gate the real Forrester, or would it transpire that, after all, he had slain his mother's murderer? He determined to go then and there to "Bully Bottom" and acquaint him with the circumstances. That his accomplice was working against him seemed incredible.

"Within two hours he had reached the Australian's rooms in London, to find him out. But he soon returned and then Preston told him

his story. That his amazement and incredulity were genuine, Tom declared there could be no question. He was overwhelmed, and for some time evidently supposed that the other laboured under a hallucination. Gradually, however, he began to see that his own scheme had miscarried, that Forrester was alive and that their secret plot to murder him had been learned and used for private purposes by another. 'Bottom' could form no idea of who the murdered man might be, nor did that trouble him. He was acutely conscious of personal danger and guessed that any moment those who had achieved their purpose would strike and proclaim the murderers. But here Preston, now the calmer and more collected of the two, was able to allay his panic. The sufferer by this event was an unknown man, together with those who might be supposed to care for him; but it was certain that they who compassed his death in this vicarious manner would not be eager to show themselves or meddle with the situation as it now stood. It must be known on the morrow who had been slain. Tom felt convinced that Forrester had planned and plotted all; and there was only one

living man who could have revealed to him the scheme maturing for his destruction.

"He held that Thorndike must be the traitor, that Thorndike had played this double game and, while ostensibly on their side for the great ultimate benefit promised to him, had in reality conveyed their plans directly to Forrester and assisted him, not only to frustrate them, but to employ them for his own purposes. Thorndike had been staunch to his master and served him truly throughout at the expense of Preston and his old companion.

"This theory became slowly accepted by the other, whose cumbrous mind was built like his carcase and could not move swiftly; but when once he believed Preston, he decided that Thorndike must instantly be visited and the facts sifted. They went therefore to see Thorndike; but his housekeeper could only tell them he was still away from home and had not written to say when he might be expected."

Mayne stopped the speaker then.

"You shall tell me to-morrow, Annabel, what happened on the next day," he said. "Indeed I know it already. Next day poor Preston opens the newspaper — and learns that he himself had

been murdered while masquerading as Septimus Forrester! He hears all the circumstances of his own death, perhaps attends his own funeral and sees you there. The mystery to me is that in these terrible crises of his life, he found himself able to keep away from you."

"You must remember," she answered wearily, "that he was a changed man. Indeed he had changed to me long before that time. His discovery of his mother's murder altered his mental attitude to all else for ever. Hamlet suffered so. You recollect, Norris, how he changed to poor Ophelia when the news of his father's death came to him through the solemn spirit of the murdered king. Oh, that is true to human nature! Love has been a dead thing between us these many days. Love was buried for me when I thought my lover was buried. It did not survive that. He came to life again indeed, but his love for me did not come to life. I have got over these dark passages of my existence long ago. I have even felt a little guilty to think how utterly my love had perished before poor Tom had come back to life again. Because he had ceased to love me, was that any reason why I should have ceased to love him? A



feeble love, you will say, that had waned because his had waned. But so it was, and my pity for him, my desire to shield him if it is within human power — these deep yearnings that now I feel are not akin to love."

He remembered what the girl's aunt had said to him and his heart throbbed, so that he felt suffocating. But it was no time to trouble her with his own yearnings. He hid them as best he could, spoke of the future and promised not to relinquish his efforts on behalf of her old lover. But he could not deny himself the pleasure of praising her for the wonderfully clear way in which she had told her story. It had in truth amazed him and furnished evidence of unsuspected mental strength and reasoning power in Annabel. She was much gratified to hear this warm commendation and made no effort to conceal her pleasure.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

NOEL TURNER.

On the following day Annabel brought her story to a conclusion and it was left to Mayne to make what he could of it. All the things that she told him had happened before he began to take personal interest in the case, and from his subsequent investigations and knowledge he was able to add much detail to Miss Grey's narrative. This now broke off abruptly, for she had but little more to tell.

"After the news that the morrow brought," she began, 'Bully Bottom' perceived that Preston was right and that Thorndike had played them false; but it was not until somewhat later that he explained to Tom the nature of the thing that Thorndike had done. At first all that either learned was the fact that Preston had not been deceived at the gate, that the real Septimus Forrester lived, while another man, disguised with absolute perfection as Septimus Forrester, had been slain. And that other man was Tom Pres-

ton himself. No shadow of doubt existed on this head. The servants, the police, the medical man and Septimus Forrester all entertained the same opinion. As Tom Preston, the dead man became the subject of an inquest; as Tom Preston, he was declared murdered by some person or persons unknown; and, as Tom Preston, he he was committed to the grave. Preston had destroyed his second half; he had literally put himself out of the way: to establish his own identity now would prove a feat of no small difficulty. But he had no idea of doing so. In silence lay safety. In order that he might establish a satisfactory alibi if necessary, he had been stopping, before the murder, at a small lodging-house in London. But there he was known as 'Mr. Preston' only, and none, of course, connected him with the crime on the morning of its announcement. To 'Bottom' he went again, that he might learn if possible the significance of this tragedy; and he found his accomplice changed. The Australian was already familiar from the papers with Preston's recorded death and he was able to explain it. As a lesser evil, among great ones, for poor Tom's disordered mind, it happened that

the awful news should fall from the coarse lips of this ruffian; and yet none — however desirous to do so — could have lessened the tragic horror of what he now heard. Even in the moment of shock, Preston had told me that he felt conscious that 'Bottom' had changed and gone over to the other side. The big man was full of plans and swore horribly to be revenged, before all else on Thorndike; but he showed no immediate desire to retaliate against Forrester. Concerning Forrester, he now admitted that it was doubtless he, helped in secret by his jackal, Thorndike, who had checkmated their enterprise and turned their weapons upon themselves; but he showed no great rage or horror with Septimus Forrester; he even praised him for his extraordinary resource; and when Preston declared that he would now proceed against Forrester and neither eat nor sleep until the man was dead, 'Bully' openly deprecated such an attitude and advised Preston henceforth to fly from one far too clever for him. 'You'll die in real earnest,' he said, 'if you dare to meddle with the born devil again.' For his own part, 'Bully' very definitely declined to have anything more to do with any further attack against For-

rester; and he warned Preston against it a dozen times. His attitude was entirely changed since the preceding day, and Tom did not doubt that the other side, by strong representations or promises, had won him over. The Three Knaves were working together once more, and he stood, single-handed, pitted against their combined forces. So at least he suspected, and he turned with very hearty hatred from them to go his way alone.

“ ‘Bottom’, for his part, declared that he had done enough wickedness and should leave the tangled thread and return to Australia as soon as it was possible to do so. He professed friendliness to Preston, but urged him to look after his own interests, leave the unequal battle with one more powerful and wily than himself, and seek obscurity far from the scene of these events. ‘Forget who you are and what you’ve done,’ he advised, ‘and leave that man alone if you want to live to see next year.’

“He then explained to Preston the thing that had happened and the truth concerning the man whose life he had taken. He reminded him that when Forrester came to England, he brought with him his dead wife’s remaining children,

and he added a fact that Tom had not learned until that moment. His brother and himself were twins, and Forrester had plotted that the one should destroy the other. Nor was this the motiveless malignity of a devil, as it first appeared to be. More than one purpose was proved to have actuated the criminal. But the greatest of these was revenge — a revenge absolute and terrific on Preston, when there came to Forrester's ears the news that his secretary was secretly scheming to take his life. Into this web of wickedness had Preston's unknown, innocent brother been drawn — to perish.

"Henceforward Tom felt that he was surrounded with enemies and sealed with the brand of Cain. His steadfast purpose: to destroy Forrester, was not relinquished, but for the time he was not master of himself and guessing his own danger felt it would be wiser to seek concealment and vanish away. Forrester might expect immediate attack and would guard himself accordingly and take unusual precautions. There was also the probability that 'Bottom' had turned informer and would, his own neck safe, give Preston up to justice at Forrester's dictation. From this welter of difficulty and

danger, and haunted by the dreadful furies that pursue a fratricide, the wretched man's first thought was to escape by death. But the one dominating passion I have mentioned restrained him. His life yet possessed value and he held himself henceforth as a machine only of retribution and revenge. Forrester, indeed, had planned and executed Preston's ultimate destruction, for life was no longer tolerable to him stained for ever with his twin brother's blood; but another life had to answer for these atrocious crimes before he was willing to depart. That Forrester must perish at his hands became the oracle of destiny to him. Upon that point his spirit was inexorable.

"To secure this end in the long run and, meantime, to preserve his own temporary safety by disappearance he came here, as a place of all others least likely to be thought upon in connection with him. He disguised himself by growing his beard and sought employment of a menial character, the better to turn suspicion from him. As a day labourer he worked at the Botanical Gardens, and there made enough to keep himself while he weighed his future plans and waited their development.

He had considered the desirability of letting me hear that he lived, but had decided against so doing, for he knew that I supposed him dead, and since now, by his own act he held marriage to be impossible, he decided that I had better think him dead and recover from the grief and shock of the loss as quickly as my nature would let me do so.

"Sudden sight of me in the Botanical Gardens broke down the resolution, however. He was thrown out of his usual watchful reserve. He spoke and declared himself on the impulse of the moment.

"The rest you know, Norris, I told you how I consented to obey him, though why I did so and why he urged me to do so I can hardly understand. It was not for the old love's sake; but so far as I could comprehend, the man's nature — now changed radically for the worse and deteriorating in certain particulars — cried out for an ear to listen to his wrongs and applaud his plots and projects. I stayed near him because I hoped to help him and even save him. His plans indeed were always changing and he drifted helplessly between the gusts of his great passion. As time advanced he grew



more restless and I became more hopeless. For I repeat, Norris, that I had only stopped here under these strange conditions, and put you to pain and my aunt to great grief, that I might if possible rescue this unhappy man from himself. Yes, I wanted to save Tom if I could, and I tried every means in my power to purify his mind and lead him away from the poison that filled it. I cannot tell you how hard I fought or how I exhausted my resources to bring him a little nearer peace. I wanted him to leave the country — to get right away from it for ever and to trust to time and change and new conditions and interests opening around him, to obliterate the horror of the past and open a way to some happiness and contentment in the days to come. I felt it my duty to press this course upon him and I argued, too, with all the wit that I could muster, that he was not a murderer indeed, for the man he had meant to murder still lived. He was only his brother's murderer by force of terrible circumstances and not of purpose. He swept aside these arguments as sophistries and held to it that his crime could never be lessened by any prattle of words. He obtained two days leave, went to London,

and called at the lodging-house where 'Bully Bottom' had dwelt. But he only heard concerning him, that he had returned to Australia. The following day he hid in Link Court and saw Thorndike drive Forrester to his place of business as usual.

"He returned impressed with a determination to delay no longer, since Forrester now felt secure, and he told me something in this connection which greatly rejoiced me. Tom had written to Forrester before leaving London and informed him that he was about to leave England. 'I told him,' said Preston, 'that he had been too clever for me and that since the death of my brother, my views of life and death were changed and that I had seen the Light. I told him that I should pray for him to live long enough to expiate his sins and make his peace with Heaven, as I hoped to do, and I added that I was now going out of his life for ever, to labour in the paths of rectitude and atone, if Providence would accept my atonement, for the awful act which he had caused me to commit. How far,' continued Preston to me — 'How far the man will believe me I know not and I care not. Nor can I convince myself

whether what I wrote to him is true or false.'

"Be sure, Norris, that I prayed poor Tom to make the letter true, to leave England for ever and begin a new life far away from the scene of these terrible events. He continued in doubt for some days and then happened an incident to which he attached great importance. It was a trifling matter in itself, and not until too late did he see the possibility to which it pointed.

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"We were together in the Botanical Gardens, and Preston worked while I stood and spoke to him, for he liked me often to go and see him there. He stopped for a moment and a man passing by caught sight of his face and uttered an exclamation of the utmost astonishment.

" 'Good Powers! You!' he said. 'Wonders never cease I'm sure! To think of Noel Turner coming to light again!'

"The speaker was a grey-haired, middle-aged man and he uttered his words with a sharp, northern accent.

"Preston assured him that he was mistaken, but for a time he seemed disinclined to believe it.

" 'Tell that to Bessie Garfitt!' he answered.

'If you're not Turner, who the mischief are you?'

"Preston again denied this curious charge and referred to me for proof of his identification. This I furnished and the stranger, but partially convinced, expressed his apologies and went off mystified. He had not been gone long when Preston desired to see him again and declared that the man doubtless referred to his dead brother. 'Of course,' he explained, 'my murdered twin must be missing from somewhere; and that man will know where. It is true,' he added, 'that I wear a beard now, but my brother may always have done so, and hence the absolute resemblance to the stranger's eye!' He was greatly concerned at this discovery and made every effort to find the man who had spoken to him; but, as luck would have it, the stranger must have gone from the gardens straightway. At any rate he could see nothing of him and he did not visit the scene of Preston's labours again.

"For some days this occupied Tom's mind and he puzzled not a little concerning it. As a result he shaved off his beard and so assumed his former appearance. He caused me the live-

liest anxiety and fear at this time, for his mind seemed rapidly failing and his power of concentration and application had much weakened. At last, however, he seemed definitely to turn to the plan that I had urged on him so strongly, and he decided to go to Bristol, that he might glean information respecting certain steamers which trade from that port to the West Indies. Of the West Indies he spoke and suggested that there he might find peace and escape from the eternal horror of his thoughts. I did everything in my power to further this intention and keep him up to it, but I had some ado to steady his mind for, before the day came, he was already concerning himself with a variety of other ideas.

“Little thinking that he was deceiving me in the matter and already had his plans matured for another attack on Forrester, I prevailed with him, and even went to the station with him and saw him leave Bath for Bristol. He promised to return on the same evening and inform me of the result of his inquiries, but he did not come back and I heard nothing of him the next day, or the next. My anxiety for him, acting on a mind already overstrung and sick,

produced serious trouble as you know. I became possessed and haunted. My nerves broke down under the strain and I feared that the impending illness would rob me of my reason. Then came a long and rambling letter from Preston and I seemed to detect actual madness peeping out of it. Either he was mad, or else I was — so I told myself. He spoke of being a scourge in the Hand of His Maker, and the tool destined to sweep Septimus Forrester from his place in the world. His plans were matured and an angel with a flaming torch would go before him, and another would steady his pistol arm, so that when he fired, his bullet would speed straight to the blackest heart that ever beat in the breast of man. Much of this he wrote and the letter had evidently been carried by him for some days before he despatched it, because the date was two days previous to that of the postmark.

“And then, Norris, I fell ill in earnest, yet kept my wits long enough to send for you first.”

“Thank Heaven you did so,” he said. “But I wish you had been able to summon me before. One question alone I have to ask of you. What of your gold bracelet with the turquoise star?”

"That! Tom took it. He had queer fancies you know. He gave it to me originally and he took it before he went to Bristol to wear 'as a mascotte' he said, to bring him luck."

Mayne nodded thoughtfully. "I understand now what he was doing at Hangar Knoll the night after the second failure to destroy Forrester. And now another point is raised."

He bade her be silent for a few moments, and concentrated the whole strength of his memory on one thought alone.

"The strange thing is that the name of 'Noel Turner' is not unfamiliar to me," he told Annabel. "Why I know it already and in what connection I have lately met the words, I cannot for the moment recollect. But know them I do; and I will trust my memory to tell me why I know them and when they came into my mind. Give me only a little while for the effort."

He shut his eyes and put his face on the table, in such an attitude that there was an increased flow of blood to the brain.

For some time he remained motionless and silent. Then memory triumphantly asserted itself and linked the name with a recent experience.

"I have it!" he cried. "Scotland Yard — list of the missing — Noel Turner — Ellesmere — Shropshire."



## CHAPTER XIX.

### ELLESMERE AND AFTER.

There remained for the detective one more task before collecting, if possible, the threads of this tangled skein. He determined to identify the man missing from Ellesmere with Preston's brother.

The fact admitted of little doubt after the interview between Preston and the stranger, who so evidently mistook him for the vanished Noel Turner; but Mayne pursued the clue because incidentally it might serve to furnish other links in the chain now reaching completion. There were still weak and uncertain places in this chain and the detective felt far from sanguine that he would ever complete it, for Tom Preston might at any moment precipitate action on the part of others and defeat the cause of justice. Indeed Mayne felt this to be probable; but he lost no time and visited the north two days later.

Upon his advice Annabel remained where she

was for the present, though now strong enough to travel; but Norris felt danger might arise out of her return to Ealing and the publicity her sudden resurrection was bound to awaken.

"Only your aunt is to be considered," he said, "and she is already past the depths of her sorrow. To wait a little longer will not harm her now. At present she entertains the highest opinion of Septimus Forrester and we will not shake it yet."

The girl promised to communicate with him instantly should Preston return or be heard of during his absence, and he, giving Ellesmere post office as his address, returned to London and set out early on the following morning for the north.

Any event of exceptional character takes long to be forgotten in a rural district, where little ever happens to excite the pastoral mind. It was now nearly six months since Noel Turner had disappeared from Ellesmere, but Mayne found the event still fresh in the memories of many bar-loafers at the inn where he put up.

What there was to learn he speedily gleaned, and inviting different men on different occasions to give a description of the vanished Turner,

perceived that he did indeed resemble Preston very closely in every particular, save one. He was described as having a close, straw-coloured beard, whereas his twin brother had worn none until he hid himself at Bath.

The woman Bessie Garfitt was easily found and she proved to be the dead man's sweetheart. Her loss had sadly tried the girl and she wept copiously in telling the story, but was glad to furnish all the particulars in her power. Noel Turner had been a man of good position in his modest calling of over-seer to a large nursery gardener. He had been apprenticed to this firm as a boy, and had worked up to his responsible post by dint of steady service and honest behaviour. He was to have been married during the following autumn and had been keeping company with his sweetheart for three years. Of his family or origin nothing was known. He had been apprenticed during the life of a former proprietor of the nurseries, and the present owner only knew that Turner, though still a young man, had been associated with the firm nearly as long as any of the present employees. He then detailed those events that had preceded his over-seer's disappearance.

To Turner it seemed there had come a sudden offer of employment, and the salary was so generous, the general inducements so high, that he seriously debated acceptance. Secrecy was enjoined and welcomed, for Turner felt in no necessity to mention the matter until all was settled, while those who approached him made it a special condition of the appointment that nothing should be announced until the man had seen and spoken with his would-be employer. A certain air of mystery enveloped the proceedings, but he obeyed his directors and kept silence — save to one ear. To Bessie Garfitt he whispered of the fortune suddenly rising above the horizon of their lives and she was glad and hoped much from the other.

Preliminaries were carried through with the utmost expedition, and certain letters having been exchanged, an appointment was made for Turner at Shrewsbury. He kept it and was never seen again. Local inquiries and investigations furnished no record of his actions. Not a trace of his doings at Shrewsbury were forthcoming, nor could any evidence of his proceedings or sign of himself be again chronicled. He had never written to Bessie Garfitt nor com-

municated with his present employer; and yet, when he departed, it was clearly understood that he would return to Ellesmere on the following day.

Comparison of dates showed Mayne that Turner had left his home four days before his death; and, for the rest, he sought some independent witnesses as to the man's character, and then felt he knew all that need be known in this connection.

The dead man's master spoke of him as honest and simple but obstinate.

"He had great determination of character and a man of more punctilious honesty never walked," he explained, "but he was a little apt to run too swiftly to conclusions and, once an idea lodged in his head, no power on earth would ever dislodge it again. He was credulous and prone to lend an ear to fables. In horticulture, you must know, many fables exist, and though a sound man with a very thorough knowledge of general principles, poor Turner was too ready to jump at conclusions and too ready to believe anybody who came along with a new wonder. There was much that was fine about his character and an unusual refinement

distinguished his mind. He could have done nothing mean or underhand. There was undoubtedly good blood in him; but he had no settled recollection of his earliest days. Questioned concerning them, he once told my father, who ran this business before I did, that he remembered a woman who must have been his mother and a little boy and girl — possibly his brother and sister. As to my father's knowledge, he could only say that as a lad Turner had come through a lawyer, and that he had taken with him a premium of one hundred pounds and accepted him as an apprentice. On his twenty-first birthday, Turner had received that sum back again from my father, who always declared that he never trained a better man."

Mayne impressed upon those he consulted the importance of temporary secrecy and then, feeling that the rest of the game must be played in London or at Ealing, returned to his home and devoted some patient hours to calculating his best line of action. For amongst various courses it was not obvious which would end most effectively. The present situation of Tom Preston enormously complicated the problem,

since it appeared impossible to judge what view a jury was likely to take of his crime. Mayne could recollect no case, and discover no precedent of what had happened, where a man, designing to kill one fellow-creature, had murdered another.

Yet to Tom Preston his mind turned and, after long thought, he decided if it might be possible to come face to face with Tom, hear what remained to be heard from him and tell him all there was for him to know.

He endeavoured, first, to look at the situation from the point of view of each concerned in it, and thought that he had gained not a little from the survey, though the truth was otherwise.

Of Forrester it might be said that the master of "Hangar Knoll" was absolutely unsuspecting in every direction save one. He had sent Mayne a cheque for fifty guineas as payment of his unsuccessful services in the search for Anna-bel Grey, and he was now cured and pursuing the ordinary business of his life; but that he went haunted by the fear of Tom Preston, and was doubtless busy to circumvent him in secret, the detective felt no doubt. He guessed,

indeed, that Preston might yet get the worst of exchanges with such an enemy, and felt it was not beyond possibility that they had already met for the last time and that the unfortunate younger man had lost the battle and his own life together. Preston might already lie beside another victim in the lily pond.

With respect to Thorndike, against whom the detective felt a deeper loathing than any he entertained for his master, Mayne supposed that he must either be assisting Forrester to crush his foe, or else already have helped him in that task. He, too, would be unsuspecting, and neither he nor his principal could by any possibility regard Mayne as opposed to them. Forrester indeed knew Mayne in his true character, and had employed him as such, but Thorndike was unaware of his identity and though now on most familiar terms, supposed that Mayne, was one Ted Wilson — a bird of like feather with himself, who hovered on the borderland of a criminal life.

Events however, had moved in a strange direction while Mayne was absent, and the attitude of Thorndike and Forrester towards him-



self seemed soon destined to be violently changed by a strange accident.

Mayne now took the initiative and renewed his old relations with Timothy Thorndike — an action that swiftly brought things to a climax, but in a manner widely different from his anticipations.

To the home of the car-driver he went, one evening later, with the assurance of a welcome guest; and he invented a tale of certain escapades to account for his long absence. Thorndike's housekeeper was glad to see him, when he arrived about nine o'clock on the evening of a night in May.

"Lor! Ted Wilson! We thought you was locked up," she said; and the idea instantly inspired Mayne to confess that such a disaster had indeed over-taken him.

"I got in a silly mess over a railway ticket and had to do a fortnight," he confessed.

She laughed and showed him into Thorndike's parlour.

"Master's out, but he won't be long I reckon. He'll be glad to see you for he hasn't many pals."

"All right. I'll smoke my pipe and wait for him."

The woman, who liked Mayne, stopped to chat for a while, chaffed him about "doing time" and then left him.

"I'm going out now," she said. "The supper's laid in the kitchen and you know where to find yourself a plate. Tell the governor I shall be back a bit after eleven."

She lighted a lamp and a few minutes later she had departed and Mayne was left alone. On a previous occasion this had happened, but the opportunity to make a search of Thorndike's apartment, though taken, had produced nothing. Tonight he tried again, with his ear alert to catch the sound of the other's approach. There was a locked desk in the corner; but with a skeleton key the detective opened it, as he had done on the previous occasion, and hastily ran his eyes over a few letters which it contained. Two referred to the motor-car; the third was a receipt of payment for new tyres; the fourth had been written by Tom Preston.

It was brief and appointed a time and place for meeting with Thorndike. The time was half past nine of the present evening; the place a

public house in the Edgware Road, about half a mile from Thorndike's dwelling. No address marked the letter, but the signature was unmistakable and Mayne knew the hand.

He made further investigations but could find nothing else. He then restored the letters to the desk, locked it, lighted his pipe and sat by the open to watch the steps to the door. He read the gravest significance into this appointment and, familiar with Thorndike's nature, felt a conviction that the little man was now working swiftly to trap Preston on his master's behalf. It was not difficult to guess what this might mean, but there was no time to consider the various possibilities presented by the event for Mayne suddenly found himself faced by a serious and immediate problem.

Thorndike arrived, and with him came Tom Preston. There was no time to weigh courses of action, but Mayne felt that his own appearance at this moment would be fatal, since Preston knew him well and must recognise him instantly. There was but one possible hiding-place in the room: beneath a sofa which stood under the window, and here only a slim man might have hoped to conceal himself since the

legs of the piece of furniture were very short and the space beneath it proportionately limited. But he judged its possibilities at a glance, threw his pipe from the open window as the men came into the hall, and wriggled out of sight a second before Thorndike, followed by Tom Preston, entered the room.

## CHAPTER XX.

### THORNDIKE SPEAKS TRUTH AND FALSEHOOD.

Mayne despite the extreme discomfort of his present quarters, felt hopeful that he might presently escape from them without difficulty. He desired if possible to get out of the house unobserved and, on a future occasion, explain to Thorndike that he had called, grown tired of waiting and gone his way. He expected that Thorndike would go to supper presently and leave the coast clear for his departure. But meantime accident had thrown him within ear-shot of what might prove vital to the difficult end-game he was now approaching.

"Sit down," said Thorndike, "and we'll talk it out; then I hope you'll come in the kitchen with me and pick a bit, if you're not too grand to take bite and sup with an old, common man, like me."

"I want guarantees," said the other. "I'm an ill-used wretch; I've been played with by Fate and fooled too long. You, yourself, had

much to do with that. I've been a victim before, but I have suffered enough. Now you seek me and find me and say that you will help me and give this man up to me. But how can I believe you — you who have been the right hand of this devil — you who helped to plot that I should murder my twin brother?"

— He spoke wildly and Mayne perceived the height from which his intellect had fallen. The voice was broken and tempestuous. Without seeing the man it was easy to perceive that he laboured under a deep fever of mind.

Thorndike replied.

"You must believe me or not as you please. When I heard he had been shot at again, I guessed that you were on his track and only wanted a bit of help to be level with him. And if I hadn't been in deadly earnest, why for should I have took such a lot of trouble to find you? I'm the sort that can do good work, so long as I have a better to lead me. I have been his right hand and I know it; I have helped him against you and against others, and I gave away your first plot with 'Bully' and played crooked through and through, as was my nature to do. But I'm tired of it and I'm not doing

this for love of you, but for love of myself. I'm an old man — old in age and wickedness — and I want to quit wickedness. This chap — Drake Chalmers, to give him his proper name — knows a lot too much about me, and I know too much about him. 'Bully Bottom' went out of the country and he's safe; but I'm not and I want to be. And while he lives I shall not be. If you kill him, then I can breathe again and not afore. I haven't got the pluck to do it myself, or I should have long ago. He knows that. But he would kill me tomorrow if there was a shilling to be made of it. 'Tis only because I drive him and have to know about his double life that he lets me live. And now I know from the chaps at Blamey and Chadgrove's that the firm is to be given up. He's going to retire and won't have no more use for me; and then, if he's got the power to do it he'll wipe me out, like a drop of gravy on a plate, and I shall vanish, and none will ever hear what's happened to me. He's not the sort to leave anything behind his back that can overtake him again. And now you understand why I want to throw in my lot with you — straight and fair. And if there's any way by which I can

prove I mean the square thing, perhaps you'll show me what it is."

"Why did you lie and cheat before, and pretend to be on our side and work that fiendish plot against us? Why did you dye my hand with the blood of my brother? Why did you take our secret to Forrester and work for him while you pretended to work for me?"

"A fair question and I'll answer it. I was frightened for my own life and chose what seemed the surest way to save it. 'Twas like this, and you can stop me if you don't see clear. 'Bottom' comes to England and finds me. I don't want him to see Forrester at Ealing and I try and keep him away; but he discovers that Blamey and Chadgrove of Link Court are the same as Septimus Forrester of Hangar Knoll, and so down he goes to Ealing, and tackles Forrester with the business of his wife's murder. Forester has him chucked out and won't know him; but afterwards you'll guess I caught it from my master. Because Forrester didn't know that 'Bully Bottom' had anything to do with the murder; and now it came out that he had helped me. I knew Forrester's way and I lied. I admitted that I had told 'Bottom'



about the murder; but I denied that he had any hand in the job. In any case it was impossible for 'Bottom' to prove anything. Forrester left it at that, and I went in terror of my life and had decided to bolt before he settled with me. But in the meantime you and 'Bottom' got together and brought me your plot against Forrester's life. Then I hesitated what to do and finally reckoned that to tell Forrester and give you two away would pay me best and make Forrester forgive me. I made a bargain with him then, told him there was death in the wind and swore I knew his life would pay for it if he broke with me. He guessed that might be true, knowing 'Bottom'; but little thought that 'Bottom' had come to you and that you had taken a hand in the game. So I was on his side, and let him know finally what was intended to be done on the night of his return home.

"What passed in his mind I can not say. I only know that he planned his counter-plot and dragged in that harmless wretch, your brother. I went up north for him in the car. 'Twas all cut and dried. We met at Shrewsbury and I explained to him that his fortune was made if he'd come south and undertake a secret job of a

very peculiar character for a very peculiar man. I reminded him how he'd been apprenticed in his youth and explained that he should now hear the secret of his origin and all the rest of it. Because, you see, when Forrester brought you two kids home, he separated you and sent the one to one school and t'other to t'other. Then he made your brother a gardener and you a gentleman. He was friendly to you both in his cold-blooded way till he heard you knew the truth; then he turned against you and planned that awful stroke to punish you.

"Well, Turner came to London and Forrester saw him after hours at Blamey and Chadgrove's. What story he hatched up I can not tell you; but he offered the young man a pot of money to impersonate him on the night in question, and he took him down to Ealing in the car two nights before, to show him his way of the place and exactly what to do. The man had but to walk up through the grounds, enter the house boldly and ask for Tucker. I think that Forrester made out that it was a wager, or to help him prove an alibi, or some such explanation. Any way the young chap, Noel Turner, made no fuss when he heard about the tons of money. He

only bargained to be allowed to telegraph home to his girl the minute the matter was over, which of course Forrester promised he might do.

“Then the thing fell out just as it was meant to; and Forrester intended afterwards to have put you away; and he intends to do so still. You see after the murder, there weren’t no such person as you alive, and he counted on two things: that you wouldn’t give yourself up, and that you would go for him again. He expected that, and he took very good care of himself as far as you were concerned; but he wrote ‘Bully Bottom’ to make it up with him at once and get him away from you. He wanted to part you and ‘Bully’ and deal with you separate; while as for me, I disappeared at Forrester’s direction for a bit, to keep safe from you two I’d hoodwinked. I kept pretty close hid I promise you until things had got quieter, and we saw what would happen next, and ‘Bully’ and Forrester was friends again.”

Thorndike stopped and Preston, who had been following his statement with closest attention, asked a question.

“What was the course of events with regard to ‘Bully Bottom’?”

"He went back to Forrester and, after a bit of fencing, and after his swearing he'd not round on me, or do me any harm for the trick I'd played him, he met Forrester again and they come to terms. 'Bully' got money — how much I can't tell you, — but a good bit; and he went back to Australia. That's what Forrester told me, and I suppose it's true. Forrester tried hard to get out of 'Bully' where you was; but 'Bully' didn't know. You'd gone and couldn't be traced. You wrote to him and said you was going to fight no more; but he didn't believe you. He hoped as you might commit suicide, but felt doubtful if you would. So there it was. 'Bully' was off his hands once and for all; but he had yet to reckon with you, and he believed that if you were alive, you'd come up to the scratch sooner or later. He thought that you'd do what you did do — try again to pistol him some day; and he always went armed and had a chain shirt, bullet-proof, that he wore going and coming from London. 'Twas that that saved his life last time you tried to plug him; and he'd have been none the worse for the first two shots you fired; but the third broke his left wrist. Then he fired at you and

hit you in the shoulder and dropped you."

"A clean flesh wound. The shock dropped me and I was up in a few moments, put a pad over the wound and got away. I was back the next night, when you saw me. It was well for you that I did not see you."

"I know that. I sweated for it I promise you! But now things have changed. I'm on your side, so help me, and I want nothing more than to rub out that wretch and vanish from this country and end my days in peace."

Preston considered.

"I should like to believe you," he said "but it is not easy to do so. You may be plotting against me now, as you did before. You may have brought me here for purposes hidden from me. My work in life is reduced to one thing: the destruction of my mother's murderer and my brother's murderer. For that he is. I am innocent of that blood before God, though willing enough to pay the penalty before man. But not while he lives."

"I've told you nothing but the solemn truth to-night. I want to help you, and only I can. You've gone too far I reckon — you've gone too far with me to draw back now."

Preston was silent for some time. Then he rose and walked up and down the little room. He sighed deeply. At last he spoke — with great passion.

“So be it. I’ll judge that for your own ends you desire the death of this man as much as I do. A coward and poltroon always, you cannot face murder single-handed; but you are willing to help me, who can face it, and assist me to sweep this unholy thing out of life. I will trust you; but know this: if you are deceiving me; if you design another plot against me and mean my death and not my enemy’s; then woe betide you! You can deceive me; you can destroy me; but, as surely as that happens, you yourself will pay in full. I warn you. If I die, you yourself will be stricken from a quarter of which you have no knowledge now, and never will have, nor can have, until it is too late.”

But Thorndike showed no alarm.

“That don’t fright me, because I’m straight as a line in the matter. I’ve told you God’s truth, and I mean every word I say: that I’m set on the end of this business once for all. I hunger and thirst to hear that man is laid out and I long to see it done. I owe him little

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enough, God knows. I've worked hard for everything that ever I have earned from him. He's used me for thirty years to do his dirty work, and I want nothing better than to jump on his dog's body and see him out of the world, and help to send him out. I am a coward and a poltroon and all the rest of it. I'm built that way — too late to change at seventy-three. But I can do what t'other chap can't; I can start the game for others to run down; and in this job there's none on earth, or under it, better able to put you in line than me and help you to make clean, quick work. Now you'd best come in the kitchen and have a bit to eat. We've talked enough for one night."

But the other declined.

"I don't want to eat. Tomorrow night I'll meet you — not here, but in the open — say at Marble Arch. Then I'll hear what you have to say. I repeat I mistrust you; but if you play me false again, you'll be sorry you were ever born. Tomorrow night at ten at the Marble Arch. Is that clear?"

"As you please, master. You're my master now."

"I desire no such thing."

Preston rose and the other saw him to the door and bade him "good night."

Then events followed each other with startling rapidity and an accident changed the probable course of many future incidents.

Thorndike went from the door to his kitchen for he was hungry, and Mayne, waiting only a few moments until he had begun his meal, began to creep out from his hiding-place. Though he was swift and silent, the sounds he made in his operation masked his own ears to other sounds, and when he emerged, it was to find that Tom Preston had returned into the room. He was come back to change the place of meeting with Thorndike for the following night; and now he stood transfixed with amazement as Mayne appeared and rose to his feet.

The detective was indeed disguised in rough costume and had a handkerchief instead of a collar around his neck according to the custom of the imaginary Fred Wilson; but his face was his own and the other instantly recognised him.

A wild flash of passion lit Preston's eyes and he lifted his hand; then thrust it into the breast pocket of his coat. His voice rose in a yell of



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fury and his disorganized mind saw in Mayne an enemy, not a friend.

"What do you here?" he shouted. "You were told to keep out of this long ago!"

There was no time for words and Norris felt himself in grave danger. Already he heard Thorndike coming down the passage and, if once the little man confronted him before Preston and learned that his friend, Wilson, and Mayne, the detective, were one, his case might be for ever lost.

He dragged his cap over his eyes and dashed for the door as Preston drew a revolver. The passage was dark and, though Thorndike had come half way down it, he did not recognize the flying man. Preston, hastening after Mayne, ran into Thorndike and upset them both. Thus Mayne reached the entrance and was down the steps and in the street before the others had come to the door.

He heard Tom Preston's voice lifted behind him as he ran in the darkness.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### MAYNE TAKES A HAND.

Until the present Norris Mayne had been little more than a spectator of events in the drama he was so closely considering. To the end indeed he seemed to move like an invisible presence through affairs in which he took but little active part and he always cited the case afterwards as singular in that particular. Yet his own actions tended largely now to modify the progress of events. The problem largely suspended the circumstances of his own life and absorbed his existence, but it was understood by his employers that the man had great matters upon his hands. They trusted him, and for the most part were content to let him go his secret way on the understanding that all should be presently made clear. Some minor work his leisure permitted him to carry out, but the major part of his life and its energies were, of course, entirely occupied, though until now he had done little more than watch the work of others.

But now it appeared that the time of watching was ended and he would be called upon to act. For the situation had become critical. Thorndike, on the word of Tom Preston, would report to his chief that Mayne, the detective, had overheard a certain conversation and that both he and Forrester must now be in imminent danger of arrest. Norris read the situation thus: he judged that Thorndike and Forrester had discovered the hiding-place of Preston and that Thorndike, acting for Forrester, was now pretending that he would help Preston and put Forrester into Preston's power. In reality he felt no doubt that Thorndike and Forrester were working together to destroy Preston as swiftly as might be and rid the latter forever of his continued peril.

Mayne's first object was to allay all suspicion in the minds of Thorndike and Forrester. The former, at any rate, must have perceived that poor Preston was nearly insane and it was within Mayne's power — so he believed — to alter the colour of Preston's assertions respecting himself; while with regard to Forrester, if he could prove an alibi and show that by no possibility was he in London at the time Preston

declared he had seen him, then he might also dispel any alarm awakened at Hangar Knoll.

He acted as follows. Returning from Paddington he wrote an urgent letter to Septimus Forrester and had it delivered at Hangar Knoll that night. The hour was late when he arrived, but Tucker himself answered the door, though he had already begun to retire and wore little more than his shirt and trousers.

"Good Powers! You, Mr. Mayne!" he cried "What an hour to come. I'm afraid you can't see the governor, though, for he has turned in."

"I don't want to see him — not tonight. I'm dead beat myself and only just back from Bath, where I'm working at present. But a very remarkable — a very extraordinary thing has happened and I must communicate with Mr. Forrester without delay. See that he has this letter. It is exceedingly important. You must wake him if he is asleep, for it will be necessary for me to hear from him very early tomorrow morning before I start for Bath again."

Tucker took the letter to his master and the latter, who had not retired, read it upon the spot.

Thus it ran:—

3 Windsor Road  
Ealing.

8 May. Time 11.30 P. M.

My dear Sir,

I have just returned from Bath — weary enough after a long and difficult day's work — but I cannot rest to-night before informing you of a remarkable circumstance. I have already had your money for nothing but unsuccessful labour; but now, I believe after all, chance and not my own skill, has put me into the way of serving you.

Briefly I have found Miss Annabel Grey and succeeded in tracing her to her address. I can give no particulars whatever at present; but if, as I expect, you are still desirous of learning more concerning her and the reasons for what she did, please inform me the first thing to-morrow, before I start for Bath again. I shall go by slow train, which leaves Ealing Broadway at 6.30 A.M.; and if you still desire it, I shall devote a portion of my time to pursuing inquiries. I can report to you in person during the evening if convenient, as I return home the same night. It must, however, be at a late hour. I took care that Miss Grey should not know she

was being watched, or guess that she had been discovered.

Believe me,

Faithfully yours,

NORRIS MAYNE.

While the master of Hangar Knoll read this letter, there was approaching another late caller; for Mayne, as he retreated homeward down the drive, saw the two blazing eyes of a motor-car sweep in at the entrance gate and speed toward him. He slipped aside and hid himself behind a big elm, for he knew that it was Thorndike, now hastening to his master with startling intelligence of the night's work.

And so it proved. The little man was sitting at the wheel and Mayne heard the car boom past and draw up at the gate he had but recently left. His first move had been accomplished, and it remained to be seen whether Forrester would believe the truth of his story or credit Thorndike's. Thorndike indeed could tell him nothing at first hand. It was the extraordinary statement of Tom Preston that would now be reported to Forrester; and he might of course believe it.

Mayne awaited the early morning with very

considerable anxiety. It brought a letter from Forrester.

"I shall be glad," he wrote, "if you will follow the thread of inquiry closely and am exceedingly gratified that accident has revealed Miss Grey to you. I had thought her sane, but, after all, she proves to be as other women. Assuming that you learn anything of importance to-day, telegraph the words 'Expect me' from Bath in the course of the evening, and be at the little temple by my water-lily pond at half-past eleven o'clock to-night. You know the place—it has a European reputation—and the way to it. I have reasons, which you shall hear, for wishing to conduct this inquiry in absolute secrecy. If I do not get a telegram, I shall not expect you. In any case please write your movements and explain the lady's astounding vagaries if they are capable of explanation."

This communication spelt doubt and also great danger. Mayne felt that Forrester was suspending judgment and action until he should hear more. But the letter also meant a visit to Bath, or a telegram to Annabel Grey; for Forrester would have to receive the message he desired if Mayne meant to keep the appointment;

and the appointment he certainly did mean to keep.

There was much to do before he went to Bath, however, and he felt it necessary to be in London first. He believed that both Forrester's and Thorndike's suspicions might be entirely allayed, and so sought Thorndike, with a view to explaining the mystery of the previous evening. At present any meeting that night with Forrester would at first glance be attended with danger; but in reality Mayne knew that it was not so. He could clearly see Forrester's mind in the matter and understood that if he did not keep the appointment, then Forrester would believe the wild story of Thorndike; because no man having overheard Thorndike and aware that Thorndike knew it, would trust himself in such a trap. If, on the other hand, Mayne's letter to Forrester was accepted as genuine and he fell in with Forrester's proposals to see him that night, then the master of Hangar Knoll must judge him as innocent of any interference or secret knowledge in the matter of Tom Preston.

With morning Norris continued his labours in this direction, went early to London, repaired



to his room, changed his toilet, and anon, disguised as Tom Wilson, saw Thorndike bring his master to business at the usual hour. It was the driver's custom to visit a neighboring public-house after he had deposited the firm of Blamey and Chadgrove at its destination; and here Mayne met Thorndike and expressed the liveliest concern.

"I haven't slept a wink for thinking of last night," he said, "and I hope to God I didn't do no harm or nothing of that. But of all the rum starts, that was about the rummest ever happened to me."

The other eyed him narrowly.

"What d'you know and what don't you know?" he asked. "All I've heard about you was that my landlady left you waiting for me when she went out; but you wasn't there when I came in."

"I'll tell you just what happened. I sat waiting and smoking a pipe and looking over some of the books of yours. Then I got dry and thought I'd nip out and have a pint and come back. I was away a good while because I found a man I knew, and we got talking and having one drink and then another. Then I

came back and found the house still empty as I thought. 'Twas ten o'clock and more then, and I didn't guess as you might be in your kitchen having your supper. Well, I'd left my pipe in the parlour, and I couldn't find it, and I got looking about for it. Then I thought I saw it under the sofa and poked in under, and there it was sure enough. Out I come to find another chap in the room — a tall, sandy-haired joker with terrible fierce eyes, the like of which I have never seen in my life. But he had seen me before seemingly, or thought he had, for he shouts and rages and gets a pistol out of his pocket and says I've been ordered not to have no hand in this matter and Lord knows how much nonsense beside. Well, I don't mind saying that I lost my head and got frightened. I thought he was going to shoot and I supposed that he'd followed me out of the street and walked into your house after me. I didn't know you was home, and I didn't stop to think or speak or argue. I just ran for dear life expecting every moment to feel a bullet in my head. That's the whole story and if I've done you any harm I'm sorry for it, but I'm innocent

as the babe unborn and I never saw this mad-man in my life before."

Thorndike said nothing for some time. Then he spoke.

"That beats cock fighting!" he said.

"I tell you the man was mad as a hatter for all I could see. He looked mad and he spoke mad," continued Mayne.

"Well, well! And to think! You're right — he is mad — or near it. 'Tis lucky he didn't let go on you. 'Twas like this: he's a poor creature, whose brain is turned along of his troubles, and I let him come in sometimes and chatter to me, just to give his friends a bit of peace. But I shan't do so any more, for it's very clear he's more dangerous than I thought him."

"Who did he think I was then?"

"He thought you was a 'tec. There's a chap so he says, called Mayne — Norris Mayne — a man that lives in Ealing; and he fancies that the chap did him an evil turn a bit ago, and he took you for the man."

Mayne laughed.

"Well, that's a rum start! To think as ever I should be took for one of that sort!"

Thorndike regarded the other attentively.

"I don't deny this came as a bit of shock to me," he said. "I thought we was pretty good pals, and I've told you many a thing worth knowing and given you many a good bit of advice; and if I thought you was anybody else than you say you are, or playing a game, or thinking to make a bit out of me at the finish, now I'm an old man — well, I should take it pretty ugly without a doubt — and get back on you pretty ugly too."

"I suppose you would, Tim. Who wouldn't? You'll excuse me if I can't help laughing; but to think of me standing here stone-broke and just out of quod — to think of me supposed to be a policeman on your track and after your secrets and all the rest of it! Why, what did I come to you last night for do you suppose? Just to tell you that I was on my uppers and ask for five bob till I could make ten. I was going to remind you of the day on the river, when I did you pretty tidy and spared nothing, and I was going to ask you for a loan; and if you couldn't give me that, I was going to ask for a job. I wouldn't round on you for all the money in the Bank of England over the way there; and if you take that silly mad man's word against mine, I

shall feel a good bit hurt about it. 'And I'll make that lunatic pay for his joke too!'

He spoke with the appearance of deep earnestness and the other tried to entangle him.

"Well, I believe you. And I'm glad to know this, for I didn't mix you up in it, but just thought the man was telling the truth and I'd got enemies unknown to me. As for him — the chap that thought that you was Mayne — you needn't worry about him. He'll soon be in a proper mess — a worse mess than ever you'd get into. The best thing that could happen to him would be for him to go mad altogether and get safely shut up at Hanwell; but instead of that he keeps his wits on the weather side of madness, and now he's plotting a sort of tom fool's vengeance on people he thinks have hurt him. He's gone to Bath to-day — to cut the throat of some poor girl. He says the wretched creature have told his secrets or something, and he's going to do for her afore dark. So you needn't worry about him. The police will look after him all right."

Mayne was conscious of the terrible scrutiny that accompanied this speech; but he did not flinch. Instead he laughed and conveyed the

impression that he thought this an excellent joke.

"So much the better. Then perhaps he'll see the real Mayne and find that a detective won't bolt from his revolver, like what I was fool enough to. I hope he'll swing for it yet."

The other made further experiments.

"Well, I'm properly relieved in my mind, I assure you. And if you've got nothing better on, you and me might make a night of it and go to a Music Hall together. How will that suit you?"

"It'll do me a treat," declared Mayne, "but I must ask for a few bob first, if you're in generous mood, because I can't go in public along with you till I get my waistcoat out of pawn. And I'm owing for my room also. And if I don't pay, I shall get turned out into the street next Friday."

Thorndike held in reserve a final test — a severe one indeed — and Mayne's last remark opened the way to it.

"If you want cash, there's a chance to make ten bob tomorrow. The governor's sending out circulars, for he's shutting up shop this year I believe, and he'll let you carry a hundred or two letters around the city if I ask him. You

wait here and I'll go in and try to get the job for you. But he'll want to see you himself no doubt."

Thorndike left the public-house and Mayne saw his purpose. He meant to bring him here and now before Forrester, that the latter might decide whether he was indeed Norris Mayne or another. To avoid the ordeal was to confess himself. He determined to face it. During Thorndike's absence, he retired into a private place and boldly cut away much of his hair; he roughened his moustache, added some other slight touches of untidyness to his clothes and then put his cap on and drew it well down over his brow. Next he walked to the door of the inn and awaited Thorndike's return. The car-driver's belief in Mayne was now evidently assured and he showed no surprise at seeing him.

"It's all right," he said, "the governor reckons that you'll do as well as another. Go in and say that you are Mr. Ted Wilson, to speak to the chief. He'll see you. He expects you now."

Mayne obeyed, his task the easier in that Thorndike did not accompany him. He recollected also that while he had never seen the firm

of Blamey and Chadgrove at close quarters undisguised, that gentleman himself was also at some disadvantage, for he had only beheld the detective through the transforming medium of Septimus Forrester's blue spectacles.

Now Mayne entered a private office; the door was closed behind him and he stood alone in the presence of Drake Chalmers.



## CHAPTER XXII.

### THE EMPTY LETTER.

The interview was brief and Chalmers evidently failed to recognise Mayne through the latter's disguise of voice and manner and demeanour. The detective continually touched his shorn head, used common speech and suggested a more ignorant and broken-down man than he had pretended to Thorndike. He assumed a lack lustre and cringing air and spoke with a coarse cockney accent. He slouched and snivelled and presented to perfection a forlorn and worthless creature at odds with society and hard put to for any plan to maintain existence.

And meantime he studied the real face of the master rogue of "The Three Knaves" and beheld a man who had murdered his wife, murdered his former friend, and plotted that twin brothers should destroy each other.

With Forrester's glasses, moustache and wig, Chalmers put off some years and sat now before

the other an iron-grey clean shaven man of sixty or less. It was the face of Napoleon — clear cut, firmly moulded, stern and sad. His eyes were pale blue and penetrating. No pity, no emotion, no trace of human doubt or weakness characterised the features. They were remorseless as a Red Indian's; but immense strength marked them and the mouth was not only hard but subtle and beautifully modelled. A ghost of humour flitted about the corners of it. Mayne had never seen such a mouth.

Resolution and will sat upon this man like a garment. From his close cropped grey hair to the beautiful and powerful hand that held his pen, he was the incarnation of power and determination. His voice alone remained unchanged. It possessed the curious metallic and inhuman tones which he was unable to disguise and sounded as though reproduced mechanically from a gramophone. A grim fun still lurked in his speech.

"You want a job," said Chalmers and Mayne touched his rough head and lowered his eyes before the other's. "Do you know the city?"

"Every inch on it, your honour. I was born just across Lunnon Bridge."

"I've a hundred circulars to be delivered by hand tomorrow. Be here at ten sharp and you can carry them. They'll take you all day, and if you come back at five, you can have five shillings."

Mayne bowed and scraped and expressed the most profuse gratitude. Then he began a long tale of his misfortunes; but this was cut short.

"That'll do. I don't want to hear about your troubles. No doubt you've earned them. I have my own and they are more interesting to me. If you're hungry fill your belly; and be here at ten. Now go."

Chalmers flung a shilling across his desk on to the floor and Mayne ducked and gathered it before it had done rolling. Then, with more touching of his head, he crept away and was soon again in the open street. He spent ten more minutes with Thorndike, borrowed five shillings from him, led him implicitly to understand that his master had seen no cause of suspicion in him and then shook him off.

"I'll be round at your place by eight or there-

abouts, and we'll go to 'the Oxford' and have a bit of fun."

So it was arranged and Mayne, when his companions had returned to the motor-car, took a taxi cab and drove as speedily as possible — first to a telegraph office and then to Paddington. He was, of course, amply supplied with money but there lacked time to get to his room and change before catching the train to Bath. It was now half-past eleven and he had to be at Paddington in twenty minutes.

While hastening thither he reviewed the situation and considered Thorndike's remarks. The idea of Preston proceeding to Bath to injure an unknown woman gave him small concern, though it possessed a thousand-fold more significance for him than Thorndike could guess. Preston had doubtless said nothing whatever to Thorndike on the subject of Annabel Grey; but Forrester had done so, and the wily Thorndike knew that if his pal Wilson was indeed Mayne the detective, he would know all about Preston and Annabel Grey. For had not Mayne just informed Forrester on the previous night that he had discovered Annabel at Bath? Norris was not a little startled,

however, to see Preston himself at Paddington, and began after all to fear that the unhappy man might have some purpose akin to Thorndike's report. But his telegram had been sent to Annabel bidding her leave home instantly and await him at a tryst in a remote corner of the Gardens.

Now the event proved that Mayne was mistaken in a passing suspicion that Thorndike might have spoken truth, for, though he watched Preston sharply until the departure of his own train, the other stopped upon the platform and was evidently not concerned to leave it for the present.

Mayne meantime had opportunity to study the unfortunate man and could not fail to see that he was occupied and troubled. He wandered about, consulted the time-tables and often stood deep in thought obstructing traffic. He was still proceeding thus aimlessly until the departure of the detective's own train.

At two o'clock Mayne reached Bath and, twenty minutes later, met Annabel. He spent some time with her and, despite his ragged attire and ridiculous hair, it seemed to him that she had never welcomed him so warmly.

Long he remembered the occasion, how she took him to see the little alpine plants of the gardens, now breaking into their exquisite flowers, how, in the peace and repose of the time — a green oasis, in the desert of his labours — he seemed to sight possibilities that had long retreated beneath the horizon of hope. The girl was frankly thankful to see him and showed deep concern for his own safety. She expressed sorrow indeed for Preston, but she believed now that he was a madman and his recent brief interview with Mayne in Thorn-dike's home filled her with acute alarm. Her solicitude proved unutterably precious to him and, upon hearing the course of his future plans, she turned pale and implored him to take no such risks as were promised by them.

Words trembled on his lips; but it was not a time for soft speeches. He spoke of the future, however, and saw no reason why she should not return to her aunt and her home.

"On Monday next," he said, "both these men will be under arrest. We can wait until then; and, meanwhile, I shall break to your aunt that all is well with you and that you will soon be home again. You can write to her afterwards."

She welcomed the proposal thankfully and took reluctant leave of him; but not before he had warned her to see nobody. Fortified for the future action by these good hours, he left her then, sent the necessary telegram to Septimus Forrester at Hangar Knoll: "*Expect me, Mayne,*" and so set out on his return journey.

But a light brighter than the sun went with him, and there dawned upon his heart a subtle and ineffable consciousness that at last the woman he loved was beginning to understand, to appreciate and feel a need of him higher and more sacred than any mere demand of friendship. By her joy at the unexpected visit; by the many letters he had recently received from her; by signs and tokens of her great dread of his danger — by these and other manifestations he, though the humblest of men where his own ambitions and expectations were concerned, took heart of grace and fell to dreaming glorious dreams.

But much, though how much he could not measure, still lay between him and the end of his long tortuous road. For the moment he designed to do nothing more than keep his appointments. At eight o'clock he would go with

Thorndike to a music hall; at half past eight, he would give him the slip and return to his London room; at ten he would return to Ealing; and at half past eleven, keep the appointment with Septimus Forrester in his little temple of white marble beside the lily pond.

To keep faith with Forrester he proposed to tell him the truth respecting Annabel Grey, for it mattered not whether he knew it or was kept in ignorance, and Mayne considered little as to how he could couch his statements.

He had fixed the following Monday for the arrest of Forrester and Thorndike, when they should arrive together at the office of Blamey and Chadgrove; and he was determined, if possible, before that event, to have Preston under control. In the matter of Preston centred the saddest side of his future operations. Mayne felt his impending overthrow acutely and was disposed to risk personal danger and attempt another interview with Preston. He might not, after all, be mentally unhinged. It was possible that with patience some way of helping him to understand the situation could still be attained to. But Mayne feared the difficulties must prove insuperable here, for vengeance was now



the ruling passion of the other's existence, and it appeared unlikely that he would let anything come between him and his purpose, or be content to let the law, in its own way, effect that retaliation he himself was determined to execute.

Mayne kept his engagement with Thorndike and found the latter full of news.

"The governor," he said, "reckons that he's got no more use for the Old Country and talked to me to-night of going back to Australia. But, between you and me and the gatepost, I'm frightened of him, Wilson. I know his ways, what he's done in the past without turning a hair, what he would do tomorrow if it served his game. The moneylending show is to bust at the end of the year, or else took off his hands by somebody else; and then it's my belief he'll want to break a link or two with the past — like them other chaps I worked for in Australia. So, if you miss me some fine day, you mustn't be surprised. Only don't think that hard chap you saw this morning with the blue eyes will have done for me. I know a trick worth two of that and can take care of myself."

"What shall you do then — when the time comes?"

"Why — borrow his motor-car without asking for it and make myself scarce — get to a port and be heard of no more."

The other guessed that there might be some grain of truth in Thorndike's future purpose; but he troubled little about it then. He left the man presently, on pretext of speaking with a pal, and five minutes later returned to his London room and changed his clothes. Before half-past ten he was back at Ealing, and there some curious news awaited him.

"A gentleman came to see you this morning, sir," said Mayne's landlady, "and I hope I did right I'm sure. 'Twas like this. He arrived about one o'clock, I reckon, and asked for you. I said as you was out and he said he'd be very glad to know where you might be found. I couldn't tell him and he stood thinking for a good bit. A big man and rather wild and off-hand he was. At last he said he'd come in and write a letter, which he'd ask me to give you the minute you come home. So he came in and looked round the sitting room and then went to your desk. He tried a pen and asked for paper and an envelope. But I didn't know him from Adam and wasn't going to leave him alone;

so I made bold to open the drawer to the left, where you keep your paper. 'There's paper and envelopes there, sir,' I said to him, and he thanked me and helped hisself and began to write. I just went over by the window and stood there, and he began to write very fast. He kept stopping and sighing and fussing about and I could see he wanted me away; but I didn't go; I kept there. He made several starts to write seemingly; but he couldn't please himself and he crumpled 'em up and stuffed 'em in his pocket. Then he dipped into the drawer for more paper, and then he sat quite still for a time. He scribbled again after that. Then he finished and licked an envelope and put his letter in and jumped to his feet very brisk.

" 'There, ma'am,' he says, 'sorry to have kept you; and don't think I minded you stopping in the room. 'Twas your duty to do it,' he says. 'For you don't know me and I may be a rascal for all you can tell.' With that he hands me a letter. Then he takes it back again and asks for sealing-wax. There was a bit on your desk and he lights a match, and seals the letter and stamps the wax with a ring on his little finger and gives it over to me. There 'tis — stuck up over

the stick in the window shelf along with a  
stranger and the man I hope is all right and  
nothing to worry about."

Mayne concluded that the woman had acted  
wisely and saved the letter. It needed not  
the words "I hope" or the red wax to tell him  
that Mrs. Preston had called upon him, and  
in return, the communication with thanksgiving,  
yet that the circumstances were such that  
his superior sense would be of reason. Yet only the  
fact of the responsibility for his actions awaited  
Mayne's action. Two sheets of his own note-  
paper had been scattered up and thrust into the  
chimney, but they were blank sheets. There  
was not a line of the letter, yet his landlady had  
assured Mayne that the stranger had written  
much.

He examined the desk, the wastepaper basket  
and the floor, but none yielded any trace, save  
the floor, which was smeared with mud where  
Preston's feet had rested. Mayne next took the  
blotting paper to the looking glass and studied  
it with care. It also could tell him little. The  
words "Dear Norris" occurred twice, and out of  
the network of blurs and smudges below, he

could only read three other words: "you must swear."

He guessed that the unfortunate man had come in a spirit of friendship to seek his aid and express sorrow for the events of the previous night. He regretted exceedingly that he had not been present to receive him; and he puzzled to know what had so suddenly changed Preston's purpose and taken him away without attempting to proceed in it.

Mayne could see no explanation, consonant with sanity, for the fact that Preston had begun two letters with the friendship implied by use of his Christian name and then finally departed without leaving any communication at all.

Turning to the telegram he found it came from Septimus Forrester and the words that it contained filled the reader with mingled uncertainty and relief. For the master of Hangar Knoll postponed his appointment until the following night. "*Come at hour fixed, but to-morrow instead of to-night.*" S. F.

So ran the message and Mayne, exceedingly weary, after a day of endless and most varied sensations, was not sorry to be free of further anxiety until the following day.

the clock on the mantel shelf along with a telegram; and I'm sure I hope 'tis all right and I done as I ought."

Mayne declared that the woman had acted properly and sought the letter. It needed not the letters "T. P." on the red wax to tell him that Tom Preston had called upon him, and he opened the communication with thanksgiving, for that the unfortunate man could approach him argued some return of reason. Yet only the act of one not responsible for his actions awaited Mayne's enquiry. Two sheets of his own note-paper had been doubled up and thrust into the envelope; but they were blank sheets. There was not a line in the letter, yet his landlady had assured Mayne that the stranger had written much.

He examined the desk, the wastepaper basket and the floor, but none yielded any trace, save the floor, which was smeared with mud where Preston's feet had rested. Mayne next took the blotting paper to the looking glass and studied it with care. It also could tell him little. The words "Dear Norris" occurred twice, and out of the network of blurs and smudges below, he

could only read three other words: "you must swear."

He guessed that the unfortunate man had come in a spirit of friendship to seek his aid and express sorrow for the events of the previous night. He regretted exceedingly that he had not been present to receive him; and he puzzled to know what had so suddenly changed Preston's purpose and taken him away without attempting to proceed in it.

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So ran the message and Mayne, exceedingly weary, after a day of endless and most varied sensations, was not sorry to be free of further anxiety until the following day.

His last waking thoughts were of Annabel Grey, and she moved again through his dreams when presently he slept.



## CHAPTER XXIII.

### FLIGHT.

Mayne was now to find from how slight a matter mighty results may spring. An act of his own — a trifling and unconsidered action — not a fault, not even a piece of carelessness, produced the most shattering consequences, dislocated his own carefully laid plans and for a season involved him in a series of fresh mysteries and the deepest personal alarm and concern for one whose life was far dearer to him than his own.

Refreshed by a good night's sleep, he was just about to start for London when the familiar face of Tucker appeared at the foot of the steps to his front door. Mayne was bound for a certain train from Ealing Broadway and lacked leisure to ask the other indoors; but Tucker walked beside him to the station and though the distance was not great, it afforded ample opportunity to relate his news.

"I said to 'em, 'Do nothing till I've seen Mr.

Norris Mayne.' I said, 'It may be nothing at all; and on the other hand, it may be very serious indeed; but,' I said, 'I'll go straight off the minute I've swallowed my breakfast, and if he says, 'take steps,' we'll take steps; and if he says, 'wait and see what happens,' why, then — not to put too fine a point on it — we will wait and see what happens.'"

"That's an excellent course to take," admitted the detective, "but in the meantime what *has* happened? You've told me nothing."

"I wanted to come to it gradual, sir. Well, last night the govenor went to bed at the usual time. He's very regular in his habits. He has a game of billards with me first, and he can play for an old un; then he walks in a big green house, that leads out of his bed-room and is always full of flowering plants and lilies and such like vegetables and then he turns in and locks his door.

"Of a morning I call him and wait till he gets out of his bed and unlocks his door and gets back to bed again. Then I made his bath ready and boil his billy of tea, for he always begins the day with tea. 'Billy's' Australian for tea pot.

"But this morning I knocked as usual and got no answer. So, after another knock and no answer, I made bold as to try the door. For once it wern't locked if you'll believe it! I never remember such a thing before, and walked in wondering what other strange surprises might happen next. The room was empty and the bed hadn't been slept in. But master had changed his clothes before he left, for his dress suit was hanging in its place — the most tidy man always. He'd put on his day clothes and an overcoat and a Homburg hat, and gone; but when or where, none can say. At any rate he must have gone out last night after eleven, and there's not a trace of him been seen since. And the question I want to ask you is this. Ought we — to do anything and give the alarm and start hunting for Mr. Forrester; or ought we to wait and trust to luck that he'll turn up again allright in his time?"

They stood now on the platform of the railway station and Mayne's train was approaching.

"Wait," he said. "Wait at any rate until you hear again from me. I may learn something to-day in London, or you may yourself

hear. If nothing happens to keep me, I shall be home again by three o'clock.

They parted and Mayne, with a short day's work before him travelled to London, repaired to his room, transformed himself into Ted Wilson and went first to the home of Thorndike. It was not one of Forrester's regular days in London, and Mayne guessed that Thorndike after his previous night's entertainment, might be still in bed; but he desired to explain his sudden defection of the preceeding evening. Here it was that news of a very unexpected and startling character awaited him and Timothy Thorndike's housekeeper related it.

"He come back home half after twelve," she said, "and he was in a bad temper by some token — a very bad temper indeed — because he'd missed you somewhere, or you'd missed him. Any way he was savage with you as he could be, and I had some trouble to calm him down. He went to bed at last and had just got off to sleep when there came no end of a noise at the door and the bell going and the knocker rattling loud enough to wake the street. I hurried on some clothes, and opened the window and

saw a queer looking party standing all alone outside.

"He was big and tall, and all else I could see in the half light from a lamp a bit lower down the street, was that the gentleman seemed to be well dressed and had very dark, round eyes, white hair and a white moustache.

"He asked for Thorndike and said the matter was urgent, so I went and woke Timothy up and got down stairs and let the gentleman in. Then I saw what looked like big dark eyes, was a pair of blue spectacles, and recognised Mr. Forrester, the gentleman that Thorndike drives for.

"He explained that sudden necessity had arisen for taking a hurried run into the country. It was a question of buying a very precious plant before a forced sale or something. Anyhow he'd only heard of the matter that evening and, delaying not a moment, he had decided to travel through the night. If he didn't, he seemed to think that the blessed plant would be lost and his life ruined.

"I went to Thorndike again to tell him who it was and found he had gone to sleep once more; but when he heard it was Mr. Forrester,

he soon bucked up, and dressed, and went down to the mews at the corner of our street, where the car is kept. He didn't seem exceedingly surprised I thought. But I think he was when he came back; for they talked a long time before they started and then Thorndike went upstairs again and packed some things in a portmanteau, which he put in the motor car.

"I asked when Tim would be back, and he said on Thursday and no sooner. Then Mr. Forrester got into the car and Thorndike shut him in and wound up and away they went. But where they went, or what they may be up to, I can't tell you. I suppose we shall hear it when Tim comes home."

These facts meant more to Mayne than they could mean to the woman who related them. indeed they overwhelmed him, for he feared that all was over and, getting wind of the pending crash, Forrester and his creature had vanished in time. There were, however, some indications that, after all, this might be a genuine surprise, for Forrester had put him off on the previous night. Though not a man to act on impulse, some late caller, or news by the last post might have tempted him into this eccen-

tricity. It was clear that after retiring he had set out secretly for London and Thorndike's residence; and it was also clear that long before doing so, he had decided to do so. Because, at a comparatively early hour in the evening, he had telegraphed to Mayne postponing their interview until to-night.

Returning to his London room he changed into his own clothes again and went to the offices of Blamey and Chadgrove, to learn if anything was known of the principal's movements in that quarter. But a clerk could only say that the business was in the market and if not presently sold, would be wound up. He doubted not that the head of the firm would appear as usual on the following Thursday — his regular day at business.

To Scotland Yard went Mayne and laid his suspicions before those who were to have effected the arrests on the following Monday; but it seemed impossible to do much that moment. A description of the two men was despatched to all ports, and other measures taken to arrest the fugitives if possible, whatever their destination.

To Ealing then went Mayne, alighted at

Ealing Common and walked to Hangar Knoll, that he might see Tucker and learn if any more had been heard of the master.

More, indeed, had been heard, and Mayne, while relieved for the moment, soon found himself plunged into a new and strange anxiety. He could not explain it to himself; it seemed indeed a futile and superstitious folly to conceive of such a danger; but none the less a great vague danger cried to him on hearing what Tucker had to tell him. He blamed himself in some measure for what had happened; and in truth he was entirely responsible, but in a manner very different from that he imagined.

For a telegram had been received from Forrester. To Tucker it had come and the manservant showed it to Mayne. But Tucker was concerned with a far greater matter than the telegram, though to Mayne the telegram offered more than sufficient occupation for the remainder of that day.

*"Let there be no alarm on my account. 'All well. Return to dinner. Forrester."*

It ran as follows:

This message, agreeing as it did with what Thorndike had told the housekeeper, calmed



Mayne's fears and modified his views of what had probably occurred, *but the telegram came from Bath*. The postmark of Bath was upon it and from this circumstance — not gradually, but suddenly, insistently, and clamorously — there arose in the man's brain a strong instinct to follow. Annabel Grey bulked in his mind and dominated it. He could not escape from the thought of her at this crisis — nor indeed did he attempt to do so. To connect Forrester and Thorndike in any sinister manner with her was impossible; they did not even know her address, though they knew she was at Bath. The man's mind troubled him; he felt fear; his soul was up in arms and he determined to hasten with all possible speed to Bath. Premonitions of this character had before overtaken him, and some had proved groundless enough, while in other cases they had been found amply justified by the event. Now he made no effort to curb his impulse; for it cried to him with all the force of his love; and he did not stop a moment at Hangar Knoll, despite a sensational item of news that Tucker unfolded to him before he departed.

"You'd better go down to the tool-shed while

you are nere," said the footman, "for something very much out of the common happened yesterday or else this morning, and it's about the last straw I reckon. We're all fairly tired of it and Lord knows who's turn next, as the butler said. There was a man found dead in the water to-day. A strange, old man that don't belong here, and the Ealing police don't know him, nor yet anybody else. And naked as the day he was born. His clothes was on the steps of the marble house by the lake, and the police reckon he was weak in his head and got in there early this morning, or else, maybe, slept there last night and thought he'd go for a swim. Anyway he's drowned and they've fished him out and are going to take him to the mortuary after dark, so Inspector Pegram says."

But Mayne was looking at his watch. He had eighteen minutes to catch an Ealing train for Bath and was determined to do so. It seemed to him that he could hear Annabel crying to him. The thought became an obsession and shut out all minor considerations or side issues. She wanted him, and he prepared to go to her as swiftly as it was possible to do so.

He did not associate the reported fatality

with the main thread of events; he knew of no man, unless it was Thorndike, who belonged to the matter in his hands. One man there was indeed in the lily pond but he slept at peace beneath it, nor would his unlovely dust be dragged to light until Mayne saw that it was done.

"Let the police look to that," he said, "I have plenty to attend to on my own account. Does none here recognise the man? Don't you?"

"Not one," answered the other. "He's a stranger to the house and a stranger to the garden both. But whether Mr. Forrester would know him, of course we can't tell."

This answer made it clear that the dead man was not Thorndike, for he, during Forrester's temporary injury, had stopped at Hangar Knoll and was not unknown there. Thus satisfied as to the only point of doubt in his mind, Mayne now hastened off, trotted down Hangar Knoll Hill, traversed the Madeley Road and caught his train as it was moving out of the station.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### A MESSAGE FROM A HOSPITAL.

Norris Mayne now entered upon some of the darkest hours of his life, for it seemed upon reaching Bath that the inner warning had come too late. To the rooms that had held his idol so long, he hastened, only to learn that she had left them upon a sudden and imperious call. At the earliest possible moment in the morning a telegram had reached her, and it appeared that the contents were of a very urgent character, for she had gone out within five minutes of receiving it. Her breakfast had been left untouched and all that she had given the people of the house to understand was, that she must hasten at once to a friend, and that they should hear of her future movements in the course of the day. But the hour was now five in the afternoon and as yet no news of Annabel had been received.

Mayne read these facts to mean that his own name had been used to decoy the girl to Septimus

Forrester. Not for Forrester would she have thus readily obeyed. It was possible, however, that had Preston urgently called upon her to join him, she might have considered such an act; and yet, when he remembered their last interview and her shudder at the dreadful knowledge that Preston was now without much doubt insane, Norris could not bring himself to imagine that Annabel would venture upon any such proceeding at least without consulting him. She could not serve Preston, and it seemed absurd to imagine that Forrester, no matter what his ideas respecting her might be, would complicate his flight and decrease his chances of escape by endeavouring to take her with him. Moreover Forrester could not know her address, unless he had learned it from Tom Preston — a contingency improbable enough.

The fact remained that Annabel had gone upon some strange errand and had not taken him into her confidence; but he blamed himself bitterly for such an assumption, for how was it possible to say that she had not communicated with him, or thought that she was actually going to him? He considered the doings of the day and remembered that he had left home at an

early hour in the company of Tucker; and he had not returned home. There seemed little reason to doubt that, if all was well with Annabel Grey, some communication from her would await him at Ealing. He cursed his stupidity in forgetting that this might have been the case, but remembered the strange and unaccountable impulse that was responsible for his hasty flight to Bath. It seemed now that demand had been based on some psychological condition in his own brain, some confusion of heart and reason, some tension and excitation of nerve forces — a thing directed by no Providence from without, but by overstrain and brain weariness from within.

He hunted through Annabel's little sitting room for any trace of telegram that had called her away, but could find none; and then, convinced that the explanation of this sudden act would await him at home, made ready to return. Leaving urgent directions that if Miss Grey reappeared, a message should be sent to him, Mayne drove to the station and was soon on his way home.

The journey seemed an endless one and his thoughts exhausted him during the progress of

it. But it was no time for weakness of body or mind. At home he found two telegrams awaiting him and a problem of crying need that demanded instant solution. Both messages came from Annabel Grey; both gave the same address and both were of the utmost urgency. But hours had passed since the second arrived.

The first ran as follows:

*"St. Luke's Hospital Bristol. Come to me quickly. A."*

And the second, which had reached Ealing in the afternoon was of like tenure, but couched in more pressing language.

*"St. Luke's Hospital Bristol. Please come. The end very near. Any delay will make you too late, Annabel."*

## CHAPTER XXV.

### THE LAST LINKS.

Little guessing that his own act was responsible for this denouement Mayne now deplored the ambiguity of these messages and the fact that even yet the haunting fears of danger and tribulation for Annabel were not dispelled. Indeed these telegrams had intensified them, for it was very easy to interpret such demands to mean that she herself might be *in extremis*. It was now after ten o'clock and no train could carry him back to the West Country until the following morning, but the hundred and twenty odd miles to Bristol might be traversed in a motor car within six hours; and in that manner he felt the journey must be made.

From a public garage he hired a powerful car presently, and by eleven o'clock had set out on his long run. Hour after hour slipped by, to the monotonous vibration of the hurrying machine, and Mayne, that he might distract his thoughts from the agony of that suspense, constructed the circumstances of the preceding



day and tried to find Annabel's part in them.

All that appeared was this: Forrester had left his home in secret before midnight and called up Timothy Thorndike. Together they had hurried from London and at the earliest opportunity on the following morning Forrester had telegraphed from Bath that he would return to dine on the following day. Preston had no apparent part in this series of incidents, yet time might prove him involved by them. Then he considered Annabel's call from her lodgings to Bristol and her cry to him to join her there as swiftly as possible. She was either upon her own death-bed, or at the death-bed of another and in either case the man felt little doubt now that he must come too late. He judged that she herself was not ill and came to the final conclusion that it must be Tom Preston who had summoned her to see his end. But how her unfortunate old lover came to be at Bristol and what disaster had overtaken him, he could only guess. He judged that Forrester was responsible and suspected now that the nocturnal excursion with Thorndike involved Preston's destruction. The details of such a scheme remained to be discovered and he could

only hope that before the end Preston had been able to make a full explanation.

At this stage of Mayne's thoughts the man who drove him broke silence and reminded him of other events. Ealing had been full of excitement during the past day on the subject of the corpse discovered in the water at Hangar Knoll; and the chauffeur now mentioned the circumstances and knowing the business of the man he drove, asked him if he had formed any opinions concerning the tragedy.

"Accidently drowned, no doubt," answered Norris; but the other knew more than he did.

"You haven't heard all then," he answered. "If you look under the cushion you're sitting upon, you'll find a copy of the *Westminster Gazette* of yesterday evening. It's a very interesting job altogether and they don't seem to think that they'll find out who the dead man is till Mr. Forrester goes home to-morrow. The opinion is that he'll know who it was."

Mayne turned to the paper and was swiftly absorbed.

The incident of the finding of a corpse in Hangar Knoll lake proved to be something far more serious than Tucker had led Mayne

to suppose. This was no case of death by accidental drowning, for the victim had been murdered.

Thus ran the account:

"An event involving elements of considerable mystery is reported from Ealing. At Hangar Knoll resides Mr. Septimus Forrester V. M. H., a gentleman of world-wide renown in horticultural circles. His immense gardens, which are generously thrown open to the public twice a week, rival Kew in their riches, and it is admitted that Mr. Forrester's collection of Australian and New Zealand flora is unrivalled in the kingdom. Among other attractions of the Hangar Knoll gardens is a lake of some three acres in extent, where the great horticulturist grows a unique collection of hardy water-lilies. We have seen the spot in late July and cannot easily forget the fairy-like beauty of thousands of these exquisite flowers — crimson and pink, yellow and pure white — glittering over the expanse of the miniature lake. But now the spot has become suddenly associated with a sinister circumstance and there seems every reason to fear the haunt of the water-lilies has been chosen for a foul and inexplicable murder.

"Beside the lake there stands a little classical temple of white marble, erected after an Italian model, and upon the steps of this edifice, which are also of marble, was discovered, at an early hour of the morning, the raiment of a man. An entire wardrobe lay there beside the water, but there is no mark or initials on any of the clothes to furnish a clue as to the identity of the unfortunate wearer. He, however, lay not far off, for the gardener's lad who reported the first find, was horrified a moment later to see a corpse floating, face downwards in a bed of reed mace that lifted its young growth above the water not twenty yards distant. The body was nude, and the police, when summoned, gave it as a first opinion that the man must have intended to bathe and, accidentally got out of his depth and been drowned; but closer investigations showed that the dead had received two mortal wounds before he fell, or was thrown, into the water. He had been shot at close range, and one bullet had passed into the brain through the eyeball, while the second had severed the wind-pipe. A medical examination has yet to be made and a coroner's inquest will be held to-morrow.

"The corpse is apparently that of one of delicate nurture and good social position. There is no little distinction about his face and it has qualities of intellect that suggest the deceased gentleman may have moved in scientific or artistic circles. Against the evidence of the dead, however, may be set that of the clothes, for they are much worn and give evidence of long and rough service. The pockets are empty and there is not reported as yet any clue as to the identity of the murdered man.

"It is, however, reasonable to assume that evidence on this question will be quickly forthcoming. None of the large staff of gardeners and assistants at Hangar Knoll recognises the dead stranger or remember to have seen him in the gardens or houses; but Mr. Septimus Forrester, who is from home, returns tomorrow, and it is hoped, if the dead man has not been identified sooner, that the master of Hangar Knoll may be familiar with him and consequently in a position to assist the labours of the police."

Light broke upon Mayne's mind at last but the flash came and went as swiftly as lightning

and, like lightning, left only deeper darkness behind.

For a moment he believed he knew the name of the dead; then other aspects of the situation led him to suppose that it was impossible that he should do so. But the delayed truth was near at hand. Only an hour separated him now from its revelation, for another day had come and the car was speeding through Bath.

At six o'clock Mayne's journey ended and he arrived, stiff and chilled, before the doors of St. Luke's Hospital, Bristol. His suspense was very short and, even as he alighted, a woman descended the steps from the main entrance and in a moment Annabel Grey was in his arms.

The caress seemed natural to both at that moment. They wondered afterwards how it had come about between them, with such unison of thought and abandon of feeling; they strove to analyse the complex emotion that had made this unpremeditated embrace a thing inevitable and wholly right and seemly and precious. But for the time neither stayed to consider it or ponder on the subtle understanding it indicated. The woman was weeping and the man, satisfied

that she had taken no hurt, did not question her immediately, but soothed and cherished her to the best of his power.

She had evidently passed through some recent experiences of poignant character, for her nerves were unstrung, her voice unsteady. They walked together a little way; then Mayne returned to the motor car and bade the driver take them to an open place on high ground near Clifton where they could sit awhile in seclusion.

She regained self-control presently and explained that she had just come from a death-bed.

Mayne's silence of the previous day had mystified and troubled her and she feared for him vaguely, even while knowledge had come to her from the dying that all fears were groundless. But not guessing the nature of his day's work she had wondered why he did nothing in answer to her urgent appeals.

Tom Preston had passed that morning and Mayne's suspicion that the man might have met with an injury and sent for Annabel proved correct enough, though it was not from Forrester that he had received his death. Neither

could it be said that Thorndike had deliberately occasioned it, though to Timothy Thorndike was the unfortunate man's end indirectly due.

Running into Bristol early on the previous morning, the car, which had borne — not Forrester and Thorndike, but Thorndike and Preston from London crashed into a brewer's dray, that suddenly backed from a side street and upset them. Preston who sat beside Thorndike at the driving wheel, was flung headlong before the car, and it fell over upon him, crushing his legs to the knees and inflicting other injuries; but Thorndike escaped with scarcely a scratch. He was only concerned for his own portmanteau, which he rescued from the destroyed car, and with the police he then accompanied the wounded man to the hospital. He waited there until he learned that his companion's case was one of utmost gravity, and then, leaving his portmanteau at the hospital, went to make a statement at the police station.

Meantime, recovering consciousness, Preston had directed the telegram to Annabel Grey and she, considering his address did not hesitate to hasten to his side.

Thorndike returned in the course of the



morning and took his portmanteau to a room which he had engaged not far off; but before the end of the day, the police, who had failed to verify the account which he gave of himself and his master and associated them with certain persons wanted at Scotland Yard, sought him again.

This much Mayne learned, and then he took Annabel where they might have breakfast. To an eating house over-looking the gorges of Avon they repaired, and while she related to him the account of Preston's last hours and final statements, they ate and watched a little steamer creep down the river to the sea. She felt her way along the narrow channel and, reduced to the size of ants, men hastened this way and that upon her decks.

"He was calm and conscious when I came to him," began Annabel. "He remembered my address at Bath and, when they told him that his state was very grave and asked him whether he desired to communicate with any one, he named me and begged them to bid me come as quickly as possible. By the time I had reached him they had operated and amputated both his legs above the knees. He knew that he was

dying and while he told the surgeons nothing of the truth, made all clear to me and explained how he welcomed death, now that it was near, and felt glad that his endeavour to escape it had failed. Not a trace of all those dreadful past manifestations of madness remained; and I soon understood why, under his terrible circumstances his mind had returned to peace. He had done the thing that he desired to do and was content and sane again in the shadow of death.

"He made a statement minutely particular and clear. But it was complicated and I am not sure that I can state everything as distinctly as he did. If I am involved, stop me and ask me questions, for then you may remind me of points that I have forgotten.

"He was glad to see me, Norris, but lost no time, for he knew there was none to lose. But he did delay for a moment. He saw my little bracelet again: the one he gave me and took as a 'mascotte' and lost at Hangar Knoll on the night that he tried to kill Septimus Forrester. He remembered it, and wondered how I had come by it again, and told me how it was for no other purpose but to seek it, that he returned on the following night to Hangar Knoll — the

night on which you saw him there. Then he asked me to put it on his wrist again and direct that it should be buried with him. I promised and he began his story with your name.

"When he surprised you in the house of Thorndike, he was in mental fever and fury of agitation about the course of the future. His head hurt him gravely at intervals, and the gunshot wound in his shoulder, inflicted by Forrester, when they injured each other that night at Hangar Knoll, was still very painful and had not entirely healed. Thorndike had found poor Tom, made a long statement of his own strained relations with Forrester and induced Tom to believe that he was ready and willing to plot Forrester's destruction with Tom's help. Preston doubted and suspected, but the other appeared in deadly earnest; he imparted secrets to Preston and finally convinced him that he meant what he said and would be glad if it might safely be done, to get Forrester out of the way and leave the country. Perhaps anybody but poor Tom would have seen through such a transparent plot and, remembering his former treatment at Thorndike's hands and the man's treachery, would have declined his co-

operation; but he was deceived; he arranged to meet Thorndike and then accompanied him to his house and had that interview with him which you, in your character of Ted Wilson, overheard from your place of concealment. Preston returned just as you emerged, because he had changed his mind with respect to the meeting-place planned with Thorndike. He came back to alter it; but that matter was put out of his head, as you may imagine, and the course of future events quite altered when he found himself face to face with you and realized that you had overheard his conversation with Thorndike.

"Unreasoning rage over-mastered him. He was frantic and did not know afterwards how, in the excitement of the moment, he abstained from shooting you. He never stopped to consider or weigh the various possible reasons for your action. He never guessed that you were concerned with other things than himself; he only supposed that you were there to play the spy upon him, and that you meant presently to come between him and the object of his life. He had heard from me indeed that nothing but regard for me was prompting your efforts; but

he had resented them from the first and forbidden them through me, as you remember. To find you, therefore, deep in the web of his affairs, when he had forgotten you, maddened him, and without pausing to think he acted as you will remember.

"But after some lapse of time and a period of consideration, the poor fellow began to see that he might be in error. Indeed the next day found him with a contrite and altered mind, and he went to Ealing that he might see you and confide in you and learn what was your purpose and intention. Some ray of reason and understanding lightened those hours as he declared to me; but the interval of peace was brief. From Paddington, where you saw him, he travelled down to Ealing and was sorry to find you were from home. Your landlady told you what followed, but she did not know all. You had heard, you will remember, from Septimus Forrester that morning. It was a letter fixing the same night for your meeting with him by the lily pond. You had thrust the letter into one of the drawers of your desk, and Preston, as he sat there, saw it, for the drawer contained paper and envelopes, and had been opened by the

woman who stayed in the room while he was writing.

"Preston had twice attempted a letter and twice failed to satisfy himself when a corner of the note from Septimus Forrester arrested his attention. No writing on earth was more familiar to him than that; and he was able to master the contents of the communication without creating any suspicion in the mind of the watcher, for he dipped into the drawer and, unobserved to her, brought the letter out under some sheets of note-paper. He read and returned it.

"In an instant all his plans were changed and he formulated a new scheme built on this knowledge. Here was the one thing in all the world that he desired: an appointment in secret with Septimus Forrester; and it did not matter that the appointment was made with you; for he saw at once that he could keep it instead of you. His earliest idea was to hide at the tryst and, from some spot at hand, kill Forrester and perhaps kill you too, if you interfered; for as he explained, his fit of patience and reason was gone again and he cared not who might suffer, so long as he completed his delayed revenge,

But he bettered his original intention. His first course was to make pretence of completing a letter to you. Now, however, there remained nothing to write about and in haste to be gone, he crammed some empty sheets of paper into an envelope, addressed them to you, picked up the fragments of the letters he had actually begun and went his way as swiftly as possible.

"His determination was now to keep you away from Hangar Knoll that night and take your place. He sent a telegram, therefore, purporting to come from Septimus Forrester — a telegram that postponed your meeting with him and led you to suppose that Forrester would see you at the appointed place a night later than that originally fixed. This deceived you; you did not go to the woods and the little temple by the water, and Forrester, coming to his appointment with you, met Preston instead. In the gloom of the night he did not recognise him until it was too late. A man rose from his seat and approached him; Forrester put out his hand to shake yours, and Tom lifted his revolver and fired twice point blank upon him.

"Forrester died instantly and the other hid for awhile, in fear that the shots might have

attracted attention; but they did not do so. He was about to escape when an idea occurred to him and he proceeded to carry it out as swiftly as possible. Even to his disguise he took the place of the dead man, donned his clothes and then flung his naked body into the water. He forgot, however, to remove his own clothes, and almost the first thing that he said to me was, that the clothes would be discovered, the pond dragged and the dead man brought to light.

"He walked from Ealing to Shepherd's Bush and there found a belated hansom cab. For a consideration the driver consented to take him to Thorndike's address in London and soon arousing Thorndike, he explained the thing that had been done. The other was convinced by the apparition of Preston arrayed in Septimus Forrester's garments; he collected his own money and valuables and agreed to take Preston and himself as quickly as possible from London. Tom says, that to the end, his own ideas were uncertain. He found himself changed in every way after the death of Forrester; but life seemed less a matter of indifference than of old, and by the time that the car reached Bath, he had agreed to accompany Thorndike out of



England, if they could succeed in making good their escape. He abandoned his disguise then and arranged with the car driver to leave the motor at Bristol garage and see in the docks if it was possible to effect an instant departure.

"At Bath he sent the telegram to Tucker, under the impression that it might allay alarm and delay search on account of Septimus Forrester. They then proceeded to Bristol and it was just without the city that the car met with its accident. The machine was wrecked and poor Preston received fatal injuries."

Mayne considered for some moments after hearing this statement and as he thought, he blushed to note how his own act had brought his hopes and ambitions to ruin. He had imagined this case making his fortune; he had permitted himself some castles in the air and pictured Forrester and Thorndike standing in the dock together; and he had — but he turned now from these vanished and futile hopes of fame to the girl beside him; he smothered his own reflection, praised her self-control and sense, and thanked her gratefully for the long and lucid statement that she had made.

He left her presently and it was agreed that

they should return to her rooms at Bath after noon.

"To-morrow, you must return to Ealing," she said. "And I will see you in the evening. But think no more of me until then. For the present I shall be fully occupied."

They parted and Mayne proceeded to learn what might be learned of Thorndike. But Timothy had not waited his pleasure. It transpired that the police had sought him and failed to find him. Neither did industrious search reveal any particulars concerning him. The dock police had seen a small, brisk old man with a portmanteau; but they could furnish no news of his movements.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### AT THE MORTUARY.

That night, Norris Mayne visited the dead house at Ealing, to find under the gas light on a slate slab the figure of a man at once familiar and unfamiliar. But two days ago before he had stood before him, scanned furtively these pale, impassive features and endeavoured to weigh something of the mingled characteristics of a remarkable being. The eyes and forehead of the dead were disfigured, for the bullet that had entered the brain and instantly destroyed him, was discharged at very close quarters and the face and brow with both eyelids and temples had been powder burned. The chill lustre of the blue eyes was gone forever; but the aquiline nose showed no injury, the beautiful lips remained unhurt and now, more than in life, resembled the mouth of a Greek statue. Mayne lifted the dead man's hand and marked at close quarters its modelling and exquisite proportions,

its tapered strong fingers, its physical symmetry and indication of decision and power.

But a fact was revealed in death that life had hidden. Reversing the usual process of nature, instead of dissolution exhibiting on this countenance a soothing and ennobling evidence, Drake Chalmers had lost that haughty and imperial aspect he wore among living men. The face revealed, as it seemed, all that was vilest in him; it stared blindly with an expression of absolute evil rare on any human features. And it was aged. Death's use is to rule out the lines, smooth the stamp of care and the furrows of suffering and leave his subjects at peace; but there was no peace here. The man with whom Mayne had spoken so recently had appeared ten years younger than this man; and he guessed therefore that now for the first time did he study the actual features of the dead criminal: he suspected that the principal of Blamey and Chadgrove's was partially disguised, even as in his character of Septimus Forrester he had been completely so.

But now he was dead, and accident, or the water of the lake, or the work of another hand had cleansed his features of all addition and

left them wrinkled and stamped with lines and cross lines pregnant of many a dark passion and evil deed.

He glanced at the garments supposed to have belonged to the dead man, saw the grey suit that had once belonged to Tom Preston, and he pictured the other divesting his victim of everything, even to the disguise of his face, then thrusting him into the water, but not perceiving in the darkness that the corpse had fallen where it could not sink. With the cunning of madness Preston had assumed the disguise of the dead and, even as his murdered brother before him, had gone boldly forth among men in the likeness of Septimus Forrester.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### IN THE "FLYING FISH."

The tropical moon shone brightly and covered the sea with a great robe of soft, far-reaching silver grey. Then came a beautiful blending of dawn-light and moon-light, as the great mail steamer "Tagus" approached Barbados.

A man and woman, with their arms round each other, stood on deck and gazed into the east, where a gentle rose colour already flushed the sky. This quickly changed in tone to pure white, then warmed to the palest saffron. But as yet the moon was mistress of her domain; the stars shone brightly; the false Southern Cross remained undimmed and the true Southern Cross still sparkled low on the horizon of the sea.

Then came a speedy change; great streaks and splashes of flaming orange broke the east; the grey moonlight grew wan and fainted; one by one the stars went out.

Barbados had been for some time visible,

white light on Ragged Point and a crimson beacon upon a further promontory; and now the sun arose in a blaze of tremendous brilliance and the island grew clear in every detail.

Annabel pressed her husband's arm.

"Oh, Norris, how wonderful!" she said.

They saw the low, undulating, cultivated hills, with miles of sugar cane, looking at first like grass green fields of wheat and barley; they noted the windmills and dotted dwellings and brown tilled land; they marked a tangle of tropic foliage crowned with palms, that clothed the shore and clustered about Pelican Island: and then they gazed upon Bridgetown with its gleaming masses of white buildings, sun-bleached beaches and strange medley of craft in the deep blue waters of the bay.

The "Tagus" took her stately course amid a hundred lesser vessels, dipped her red ensign to a man-of-war, came to her moorings in Carlisle Bay and fired a gun to signalise her arrival.

The weary sequel of "The Three Knaves" was accomplished; all save one of the chief actors in the long drawn out tragedy slept in their graves, and Mayne and his newly-wedded wife were on their honeymoon. Search had

not revealed the hiding place of Timothy Thorndike, but such a discovery, though it must have resulted in the punishment of the sinner himself, was powerless to throw more light on the mysteries in which he had taken so vital a part. Nothing remained to be explained and the annals of crime were enriched by a strange chapter in the devilish ingenuity and cynical wickedness of man.

Concerning Thorndike it was supposed that he made his escape from Bristol immediately and probably bribed some small ship-master to take him and hide him on the actual morning of Preston's death. Annabel always declared that he was in the little vessel that she and Norris marked creeping down the waters of the Avon, when they sat together overlooking them and she told Tom Preston's end.

Now, pratique granted, dozens of small vessels swarmed in upon the "Tagus" from every side and the business and turmoil of departure began for many of those on board her. The Barbadian watermen, in their white, crimson-cushioned rowing boats, bustled and quarrelled and fought at the stages. They were of all shades from full blooded blackness to mahogany,



and brown, yellow and putty colour. They shouted and yelled to possible customers, shrieked the names and virtues of their craft, swore at each other, waved their hats and clamoured to catch the eyes of possible fares among the crowd of folk looking down upon them from above.

"*Star of Barbadoes*, you want, sar!" "No, no; Massa want de *Pearl*; *Pearl* de boo-ful boat for Massa!"

"Go long wid de dam *Pearl*; genman calls for de *Warrer-Lily*!" "You nigger man dar, go 'way, go 'way I tell you! Massa signal me. Yes, sar, *Ocean Spray* coming 'long side, sar!"

An old man in a wherry alone marked Norris Wayne and Annabel and waved to them.

"Come down the ladder, you. It's all right. I'm here! The *Flying Fish* here. You've often been in the *Flying Fish* along with an Englishman afore to-day!"

The idea of old acquaintance tickled Mayne.

"Come along, Annabel," he said. "We'll go ashore and have breakfast at the Ice House. That's the thing to do."

They descended the ladder and were soon being rowed ashore. The man who rowed them

was brown as any nigger; but his features were not to be mistaken and they had gone barely fifty yards from the "Tagus" when Mayne and Thorndike recognized each other.

The latter stared and stopped rowing.

"Snakes!" he said; then he grinned from ear to ear and a few snags of yellow teeth appeared.

"You are surprised," said the detective.

"I am," admitted the other. "I reckon it's the surprise of my life. And so are you! What in thunder are you doing out here dressed like a toff and with a girl?"

"The lady is my wife."

"Well, Mrs. Wilson, I'm glad to see you I'm sure. You've brought him a fortune I reckon—or else he's lifted one. I dare say you was astonished to miss me next time you called in Edgeware Road, Ted? Ah! and a good few others, no doubt, felt puzzled that I found I must slip away so quick. But the world's a tiresome place, and I was growing old, and what with one bother and another, and that terror I worked for and a lot of trouble over that poor mad young man you remember who thought you was a policeman, I felt a sudden longing to chuck it all up and end my days

in a decent climate without any more worry. So I came out here all of a sudden in a little steamer from Bristol — a year ago very nearly 'tis now I suppose — but I don't keep no count of time no more, and I wish time didn't keep no count of me. And I'm at my old business, you see, and like it better than motor car driving when all's said."

He chattered on while Mayne considered. Then, when they landed, Norris, who had been in Barbadoes before, sent his wife forward to the Ice House with friends from the ship, who followed in other boats.

"I'll come after you," he said; and when he rejoined her, his face still bore the marks of doubt.

"It was hard to know how I should have acted; but I have let the old wretch go. His fangs are drawn now and he is leading a harmless life. He will meet us presently and row us back to the ship."

"You did not tell him who you were?"

"I did not. If I arrest him — what can be done now? A few years and his life is ended. I remember, too, that none lives who can gain

by proceeding against the man. Justice may demand it; but it is impossible to see that any good will result to the community. It is all wrong, I know, and I ought to have sacrificed our honeymoon and taken him back in the home ship to England. But I am not going to do it."

Their day ended, and the unconscious Thorndike was waiting to row them back to the ship. He prattled of his new life and the negress whom he had wedded. He refused to take a fare and expressed a hope that he would see them again when the "Tagus" called once more upon her homeward way.

But Timothy Thorndike's days were done, and when Mayne and his wife returned five weeks later to Barbadoes and asked for "English Tim," as Thorndike was called among the watermen of Bridgetown, he learned that the old man had fallen off the wharf in a night scuffle and been seen no more.

"Marse shark hab him, sar," said a grinning half-caste. "Tim was a berry nice old gem-man, and him hab lots of money, what him gib to the coloured lady him married. And Marse shark hab a berry hard time, sar, for

"English Tim" — him a tough gem-man and make Marse shark want a pair ob hands to rub him stomach."

The man's hideous humour jarred on Mayne and he went back to the ship in deep thought. Fate had done what he hesitated to do, and destroyed the last of "The Three Knaves" in its own way.

"It has been a strange chapter in my life," he said to Annabel before they slept. "I have been like a man moving over a dark sea with only one star to light his way."

"A poor little, stupid star," she answered, "but I love to hear you say so."

"Never was a man in my business more discredited," he affirmed. "A blunderer from the beginning. I probed and stumbled and wondered blindly. The wonder is that watching me, you did not cry out a thousand times that such a man was unworthy of you — unworthy even to help you."

"How little you guess what you seemed to me, Norris: the one steady light, the one strong faithful thing to trust."

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